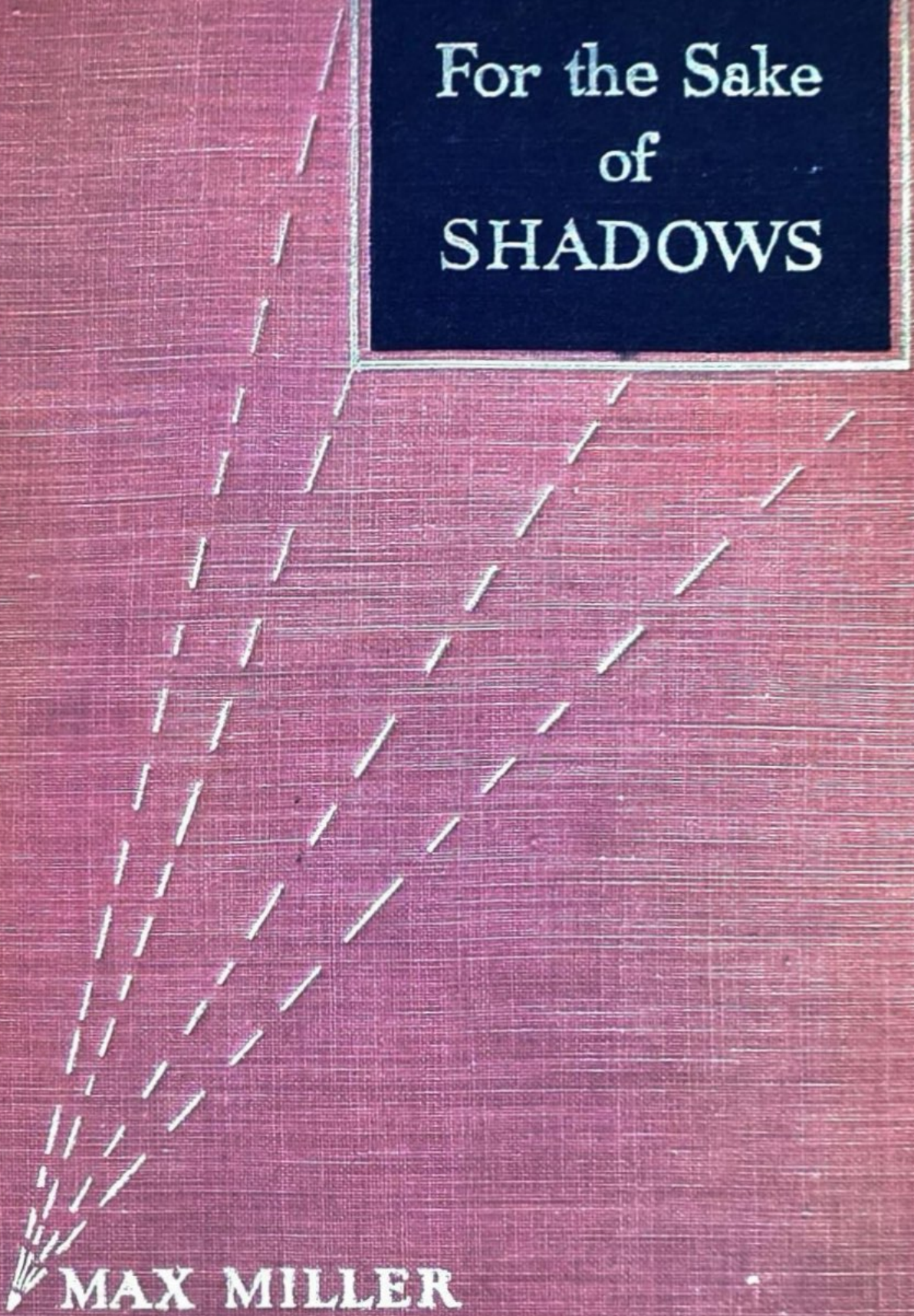
For the Sake of SHADOWS



MAX MILLER

Merle Hueckenstein

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25¢

Film

FOR THE SAKE OF SHADOWS

MAX MILLER
has also written:

I COVER THE WATERFRONT

"An extraordinary reporter is Max Miller. . . . He sits down and writes one of the most refreshing books I have read in years—the simple yarn of a reporter who meets anything from a fishing boat to a passenger liner, who is equally at home with celebrities and the garbage collector, and who sets down on paper the parade of living men."—Harry Hansen, in *The New York World-Telegram.*

HE WENT AWAY FOR AWHILE

"A rare book, a human chronicle of a human soul, real and dramatic because of its simplicity."—*The Minneapolis Tribune.*

THE BEGINNING OF A MORTAL, Illustrated by JOHN SLOAN

"One would have to go to the Dutch painters to find such an inspired portrait of a child."—*The Nation.*

"The finest story of boys we have read since Mark Twain quit writing them."—*The Los Angeles Times.*

THE SECOND HOUSE FROM THE CORNER

"He will give you a quickening sense of the beauty, pathos, fun and excitement of every-day living."—Burton Rascoe, in *The New York Herald-Tribune.*

THE MAN ON THE BARGE

"Full of barbed, ironic sketches and the flavorsome observations for which Mr. Miller is noted, this is neither a novel nor a book of essays, but a suave blending of both."—*The Forum.*

FOG AND MEN ON BERING SEA

"In the engagingly simple, yet unaffectedly dramatic, style which marked 'I Cover the Waterfront.' It is a book full of good male stories.

"He paints an honest picture."—Lewis Gannett, *New York Herald-Tribune.*

"Mr. Miller's dry humor whispers through a quiet narrative which contrasts pleasantly with the usual overcharged adventure yarn."—Clifton Fadiman, *The New Yorker.*

Published by E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.

Also: THE GREAT TREK

For the Sake of SHADOWS

By MAX MILLER

E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.
1936

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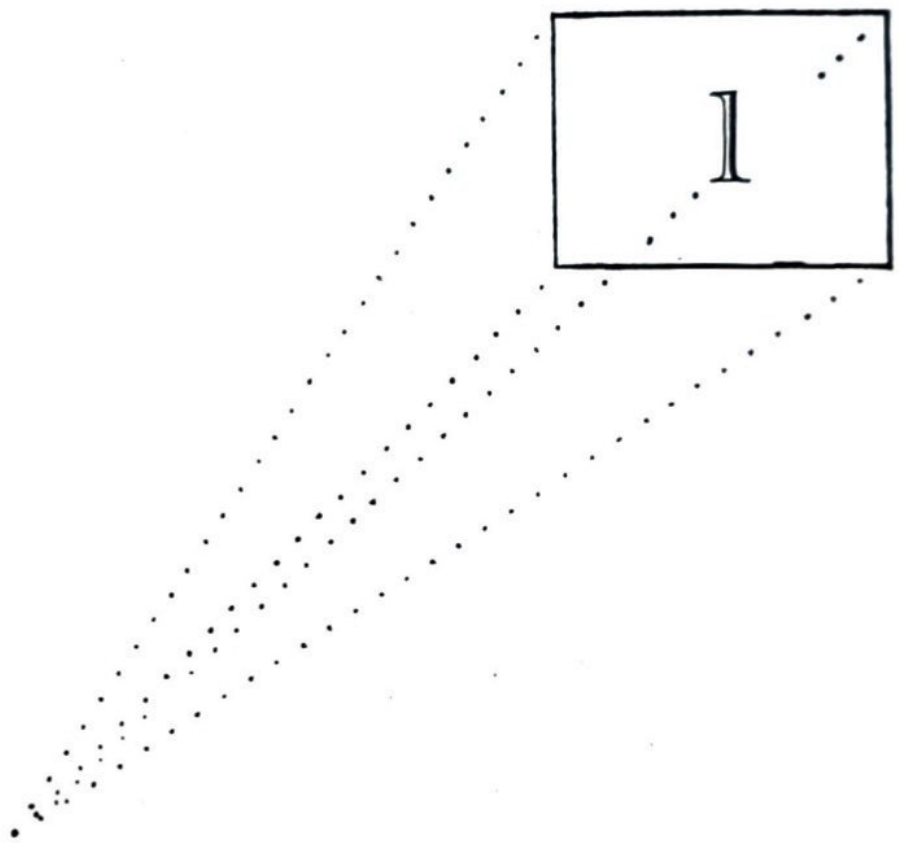
First Edition

TO

MINNA GOMBELL AND JOSEPH SEFTON

FOR THE SAKE OF SHADOWS



1

MY ROOF AT HOME NEEDS creosoting, my auto needs a new top (the light shows through from the sky), my shirts are not as un-frayed around the top buttons as they used to be, and that is

why I am sitting here wondering what to do with a girl and a boy and the United States Coast Guard.

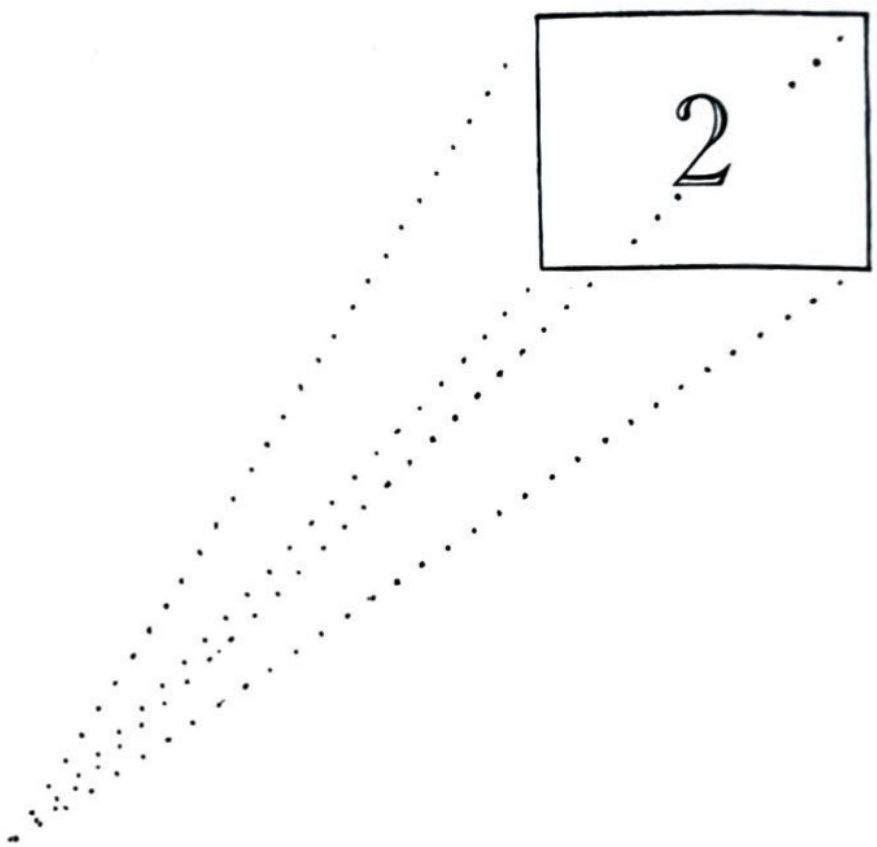
I must do something with them. They must become in love somehow, they must become separated somehow, and finally they must come together in harmony.

If I can do this, if I can create happiness for two persons who never lived or who never will live, I shall be handed enough money to buy easily what I need. If I cannot do this I shall be rather rich anyway, since they pay by weeks here what formerly we received by months on the newspaper. I am sure they will let me stay at least a week, and that will be equivalent to a month. It will be equivalent almost to the first royalties on a book, since people do not buy so many books now, preferring to wait to see first if they will come out in pictures.

The efficiency of this room is more than I expected. It is more efficient than any room I ever have had for myself. The name "Irvin S. Cobb" is still printed on a white slip on the door. The slip fits into a metal holder and can be pulled out. Many names, I presume, have been pushed in and pulled out of that holder.

When a secretary showed me this room and told me it was mine, the great author of *The Belled Buzzard* was still seated at the desk inside. He was wearing a stiff-rimmed Western hat. When the girl asked if it would be all right for me to leave my things here he answered: "Why, certainly."

Outside the building a truck is towing a grave along on wheels. The huge tombstone is of apparent granite, but on passing it proves to be hollow in back and it teeters with the vibrations of the wheels beneath the composite grass.



2

NO, THERE IS NO EXCUSE whatsoever for my not hurrying along with this story. Here on the desk are five new pencils which the secretary in the Front Office furnished me free. They are

sharpened, not by my own jackknife, but by a sharpener. And here are three stacks of paper, each stack large enough to have lasted me a year back home. They are in three grades, a rich white, a mediumly-priced white and a yellow.

"If ever you need anything else, just 'phone me at the office," the secretary said.

What else do I need? Is there anything else at all that I need? The producer has a right to expect results quickly. My boy and my girl should be well along now. I do not deserve so much money as I am receiving, but the man across the hall is receiving twice as much as I am. He has been here a year. That was good of him to tell me not to be nervous.

"Stall 'em off," he said. "Stall 'em off if they start to rush you. Just say you're not ready. They'll respect you the more for it."

But why am I not ready? And why would they respect me the more for it? I do not see the reason in that. It may be true, but it does not make arithmetic. I would like to make a great picture out of this and surprise them. If they should say: "That's a great

script you turned in, young man," I would be very happy.

I wonder if I have enough story yet to tell the producer if he 'phones? If that 'phone should ring right now and it would be from his office and he would be asking me to come up and tell him what I have—would I have enough to tell him as a starter? Well, I would have the boy and the girl. I could say: "Well, I've got a boy and a girl."

No, the 'phone mustn't ring yet awhile. It mustn't do that. I must hurry along and put character into my people, make them human, make them real, before that 'phone rings. Any moment it may ring.

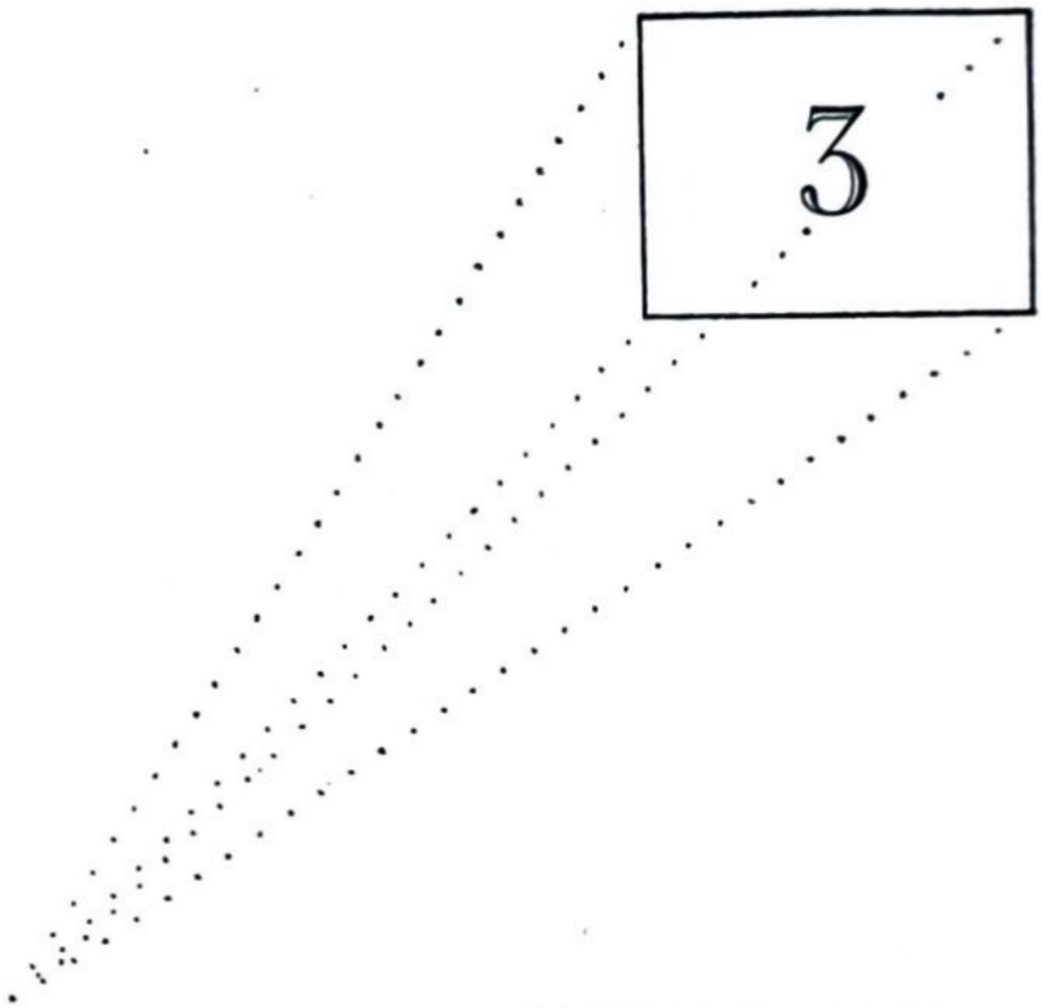
And yet those writers I had lunch with in the commissary told me they sometimes spent two weeks before completing a story line-up. Some of them said they sometimes spent three weeks. But it is all right for them to talk that way. They are established here. They have screen-credits to their names. I am new, I must remember. I am being watched. I am only on trial. I wonder if even Cobb was watched, too. Probably. Because I doubt if he had screen-credits, either.

I don't recall seeing anything which read: "Screen-Play by Irvin S. Cobb."

This is strange sitting here receiving money for work which may or may not be used. Already today I have almost earned a new typewriter. And to think that my typewriter at home was bought on installments. If these people only knew how close I have lived to the edge all my life they would be mortified at having me here. They must not know. They must be made to think I have lived on at least five hundred a week always.

It might be good business, seriously, for me to use part of my day's earnings for a polo-shirt, open at the throat, and to wear it to work like so many of the others are doing.

The shirt would be my spokesman. It figuratively would say: "What the hell. Only the frightened wear neckties."



3

IF EVER I HAVE ANYTHING

I want to get down on paper I do not even have to write it myself. The producer said: "Call a girl whenever you have anything to dictate." I who never have

dictated in my life. All is set, then, for the speedy recording of any idea I may have.

I could try dictating to her that one of the duties of the Coast Guard is to patrol the yearly yacht regattas. My boy could be in command of a small patrol-boat. My girl could own a little cruiser which smacked into a fishboat, sinking it. This is how the boy and girl could first come together, he arresting her for violation of the rules of the road.

I could try dictating this nonsense to the secretary, and further nonsense about the boy and girl meeting again in the office of the Government steamship inspector. I could try telling this to the secretary, but would stammer with the embarrassment of my own idea while doing so. Besides, there is such a finality about dictating. It is not like scrawling out the notes for one's self. The notes still remain one's property then, and he can brood over them in secret. He has not forced a premature birth on them, he has not seen them being born as something so very grotesque in shorthand.

We who fail in Hollywood are the ones who be-

come bitter about the place. The others in self-defence become numb. I wonder if someone told me that or if I have just now thought of the phrase as a gesture towards preparing my own excuse.

But if the salary were not so gasping, if I could become rid of the awareness of how big the salary really is, maybe then I could forget myself and remember the boy and the girl and the Coast Guard.

Yet if the salary were not so out of proportion to any salary I ever have received heretofore, I would not be here at all. That is certain. These people do not realize how they insult themselves by offering such terrific wages. Few would be here at all out of love. The pay must be ten times higher than the value of the work received or few writers would look at the place. Gag-men might be here, but not writers. I wonder why I came. They waved more money than I ever had seen before and, like a chippy, I followed behind them to their hotel room.

But there have been great films. There have been films as moving as a work of art. There have been films which, indeed, were art. I would not have been

ashamed to have been connected with them. Yet of such films who here honestly can say: "I did that." Nobody can say it with a complete conscience because so many hundreds had a hand in it. The producer may say: "That was my film." The director may say: "I directed that." The actors say: "That was my picture." And the writers know that the story is their story, and that without a story there would have been no picture. Where, then, is the full satisfaction for anyone? Where is the satisfaction I used to receive at home by guiding an idea single-handed from the mind through to something tangible, a book? Can all this money they are giving me compensate for this great hollowness?

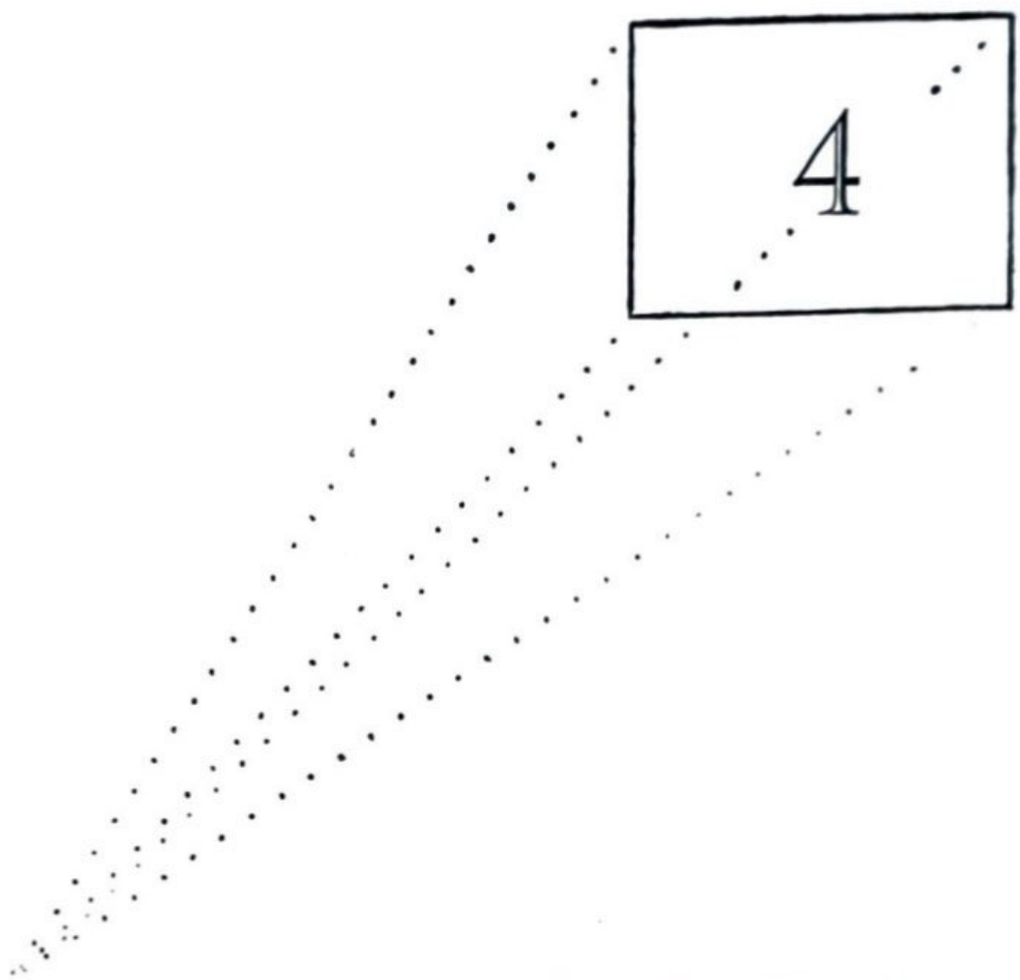
"But the experience will not hurt you any. It will be good for you."

Let me say that over and over to myself and try to believe it.

Let me try to believe that I am not betraying the trust which words placed in me as their agent. Let me try to believe that they will not resent my using them in a cross-word puzzle: the girl is a. The boy

is b. The Coast Guard is c. The three come in conflict—d.

The typewriter is well-oiled, far better oiled than mine at home. These five new pencils. These three stacks of paper. These erasers. That ink-stand and that new pen-point. I have not a complaint in the world, unless it's that 'phone. The producer rightly expects results for the overhead being spent on me. Any second he may ring and in all righteousness ask: "What've you got so far?" This is like writing in a show window, a placard next the street reading: "See author at work with our office supplies."



THIS IS PROJECTION ROOM

Four, and I am the only one in it. The operator is in a room behind me. We cannot talk to one another except through a telephone. It is operated by colored

buttons which I do not know how to work. I wish the operator would come around and sit down here where I can see him. To be in a theatre all alone is not real. It is like sitting in a small-town showhouse late at night after all the other spectators have gone home.

The picture is *Shipmates*. At the funny places I expect to hear laughs, but nobody laughs. It is hard to realize that if there are to be any laughs they must come from me, sitting here alone.

But the producer wants me here. His secretary 'phoned my office, not to ask about my own story line-up, but to tell me to go to Projection Room Four. The picture may give me the feeling he wants in my own story line-up for him. But the picture gives me no feeling whatsoever. I am studying it now, trying to see why a line-up of my own would be so difficult, why I should be worrying about it. The camera and the acting can do so much that a story's absurdity appears no handicap. This story, for instance, could easily be a burlesque on all Navy stories. Yet this story is not supposed to be a burlesque. It is supposed to be serious, it is supposed to have a message.

A gob, acted by Robert Montgomery, is in love with the daughter of his admiral. There it is, being made to seem true. But if I were to tell anybody I was writing a story about a gob in love with the daughter of his admiral I would be considered joking. Yet there it is and I am studying it.

The man who wrote the story is a friend of mine. His office is a few doors from my office. He is retired from the Navy now because of a broken back. He was a splendid aviator, as splendid as they come. He was stationed with the aircraft squadrons, battlefleet, back in San Diego. But one night he fell off the porch of a home in Coronado. The fall was only a foot or so, but he was taken to the Naval Hospital and told he never would walk again.

He learned to move his fingers ever so slightly and a writing-board was rigged for him over his hospital bed. After a long time of practice he sold a story, then another, and then another. He sold *Hell Divers* to the screen. He sold *Dirigible*. He sold *Shipmates*.

"I give them the formula they want," he said. But also he gives them something else. He gives them the

co-operation of the Navy. The Navy trusts him. He is the Navy's medium with the studios, and the studios' medium with the Navy. He does the best he can for both sides, trying to compromise the Navy's actuality with the studios' burlesque fantasy.

Some of the stories written about the Navy are so un-Navy that the Navy will not help with the filming. But his formula stories are acceptable to both sides. "A formula story is good for eighty pictures," he said. "You can remember that, too, in your 'Coast Guard.'"

He needs two canes with which to walk, but it is better than not walking at all. He made himself walk.

Yet I who am not a cripple am beginning to depend on him for uplifting. This seems unreasonable. This seems like the subject for a story, also. I visit a physically helpless man to have my spirits revived in this place. I would not have believed it until now.

In this dark projection room I am wondering what will be used for a climax. Robert Montgomery, the gob, will have to vindicate himself for all his smartness. He has become unpopular with the other sailors

and officers, and now he will have to become popular. He will have to do it quickly, whatever it is, because already I have been here more than an hour. The admiral, retired now and unhappy as a civilian, has said he wished he could go down fighting. That is it, then. The admiral is going to be killed in splendor somehow and the public will not feel sad about it because of that speech. He will die, but Montgomery who has not made such a speech must live. A barge of explosives is threatened by fire. Both the sailor and the retired admiral hurry out to it. Side by side they behave bravely, and the admiral is carried to an Arlington grave and Montgomery is sent to Annapolis.

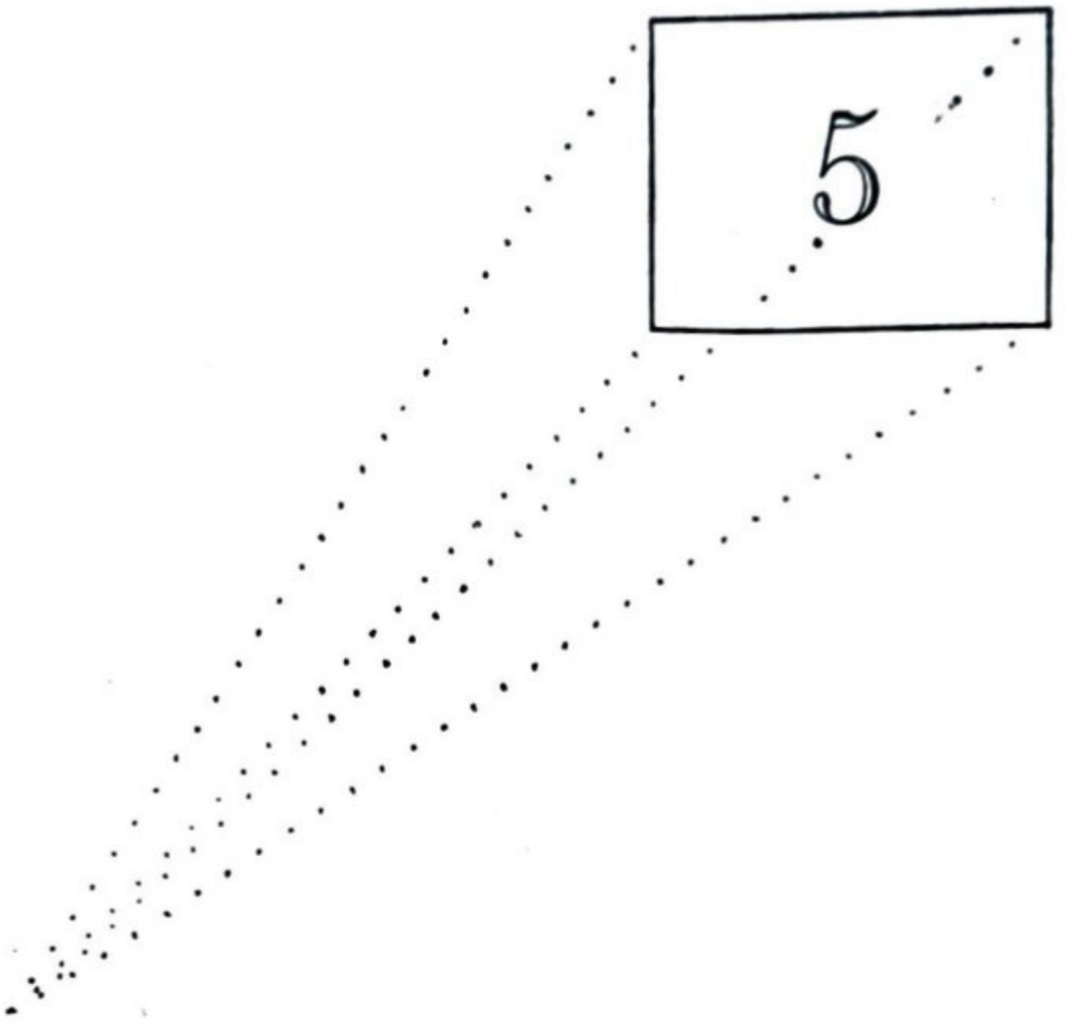
My boy in the Coast Guard can do the same thing, but maybe he should be a sailor, too, and not an officer.

I remember my crippled friend saying: "It's better to make the hero an enlisted man because then the audience will feel nearer to him. But if he's an officer the public doesn't so much care because he's then something apart. The public doesn't know what it's like to be an officer. The majority doesn't. But the

majority does know what it's like to be somebody way down below."

All the lights have gone on in Projection Room Four. The operator apparently is waiting for me to tell him something. But even if I did know how to use the 'phone there is nothing I could say to him of interest. He has been around here much longer than I have. Yet for me just to slink out the door without thanking somebody does not seem right, for I have been paid to see a picture.

Yes, I have earned ten dollars or so while sitting in the darkness there. I feel almost like certain critics must feel who, producing nothing themselves, not even *Shipmates*, receive a salary criticizing those who do produce. To be cute and to be clever is so easy when one's own limitations safely eliminate one from active participation.



5

FROM AN OPEN WINDOW

across this narrow courtyard three voices are coming to me in story-conference. By closing my own window I could have partial silence, but do not care to do

this. The combined voices resemble the trip-trip-trip sound of carpenters at work, but these carpenters are not working from a blue-print. Rather they are arguing about each board before it is nailed in place, and then after it is nailed in place it is ripped loose again.

This is how stories are built, then. And I must listen. I must learn.

"I'm just thinking out loud now, you guys, so don't jump on me too soon—"

"But I tell you, Bob, she shouldn't be laid. The heavy should just make a pass at her—"

"No, I agree with Sam. I don't think she would let him. Christ, you forget that—"

"But I'm thinking of the Front Office, fellows. You know what the Front Office did to Charlie's script that time. He had to cut out that second and third sequence—"

"Yes, but this is a different story—"

"Like hell it is, Bob. Didn't Charlie's script have a girl who—"

"Aw, just listen to me a minute now, you guys. I'm just thinking out loud now, I admit. But if she

comes to his house and she doesn't know her sister is there—"

"How doesn't she know her sister is there—"

"We plant it. We plant it there the other time—"

"How about us all knocking off and getting some coffee. It'll do us good. It'll clear up the cobwebs—"

"Okey—"

"Okey—"

"But before we go, how you standing on the U.S.C. game? I've got two to one that Washington State takes 'em—"

"Hell, that's no bet. It'd be a bet if you gave Washington State not more than six points."

"Before we go I've got another idea. See what you think about this one. Why not have him go to her house instead? Then we could—"

"Let's talk about it afterwards—"

"Okey—"

And now there is silence across this narrow courtyard, and once more I remind myself not to be bitter. These people are here for the money and they are receiving it. Money is their goal and the method they

use to reach this goal is their own business. They have come onto this method by trial-and-error the same as any other new business is developed by trial-and-error. So long as I am in it I should not laugh at it but should learn it.

For me to try to feel superior is a mistake. I am one of them now. The moment I consented to walk through the gates to accept pay I became one of them. They had not compelled me with a rifle to do so. I could have stayed away. Or if I know better than they know how stories should be prepared for the screen, no law prevents me from establishing my own studio. It would meet economical disaster. That is the answer.

To ridicule studios is not logical. It would be logical if the studios were a philanthropical institution of art. But studios are a factory for making money the same as any other factory is for the purpose of making money. And this factory happens to make more money than the other factories, the nail factories, the suit and hat factories. We may ridicule the mannerisms and the methods of the foremen here but we cannot deny

that they obtain what they go after. Not once have they said to me: "We want a grand piece of work even if it does lose money at the box-office."

They are not running a charity, and for this frankness at least I am grateful.

The only excuse, really, for dignifying a studio with one's own indignity is on sensing how many great books, how many truly great stories, have remained un-written because of it. Too many young authors are drawn here after their first success, and hence are lost to the country forever.

They come intending to remain only a year to lay a stake for future writing of their own. Such a resolution is a joke. They live up to their income, they become so accustomed to living with such a large overhead, that to make a break for it and to live in a shack again becomes absurd. They become habituated to becoming conference-writers like these men outside the window, forgetting that heighth can come only through oneself. One tree cannot absorb nourishment for another. The other can only imitate.

These writers, once so independent, become only

too soon poor frenzied machines donating their life's few hours to obtain a superfluity of things they do not need, do not enjoy, and which in time will be snatched from them anyway.

One can forgive those persons for working here who cannot make their living otherwise than by writing for pictures. But it is difficult to forgive those who can make their living in legitimate outside writing but are here regardless. That is greed. That is the same as a scientist forsaking his test-tubes to sell patent liver-cures to the idiots of the Tennessee mountains.

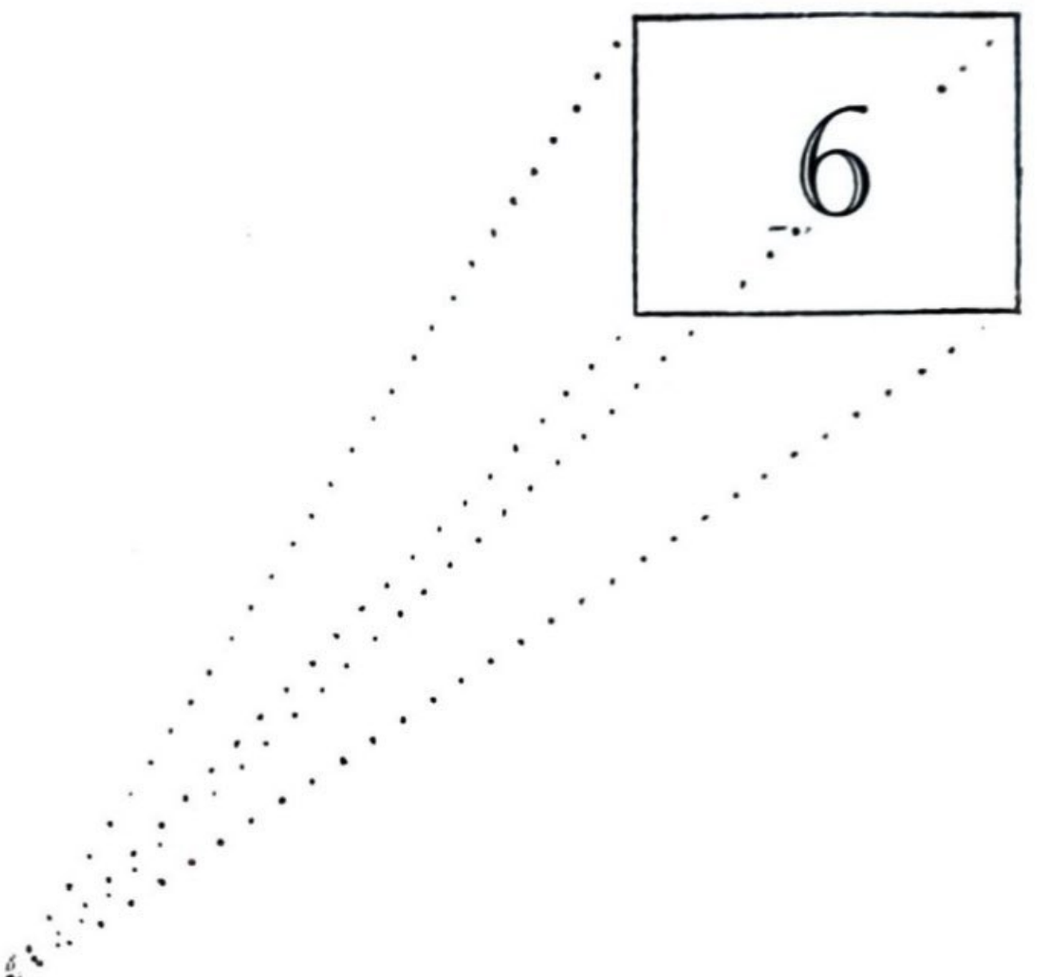
The more exclusive a writer's audience, the more limited is his income naturally, since literature is now judged only by that rather absurd thermometer of whether or not the book is a best-seller. The more average it is the more appeal it has to the average, which is the majority.

Pictures follow the same principle and out of financial necessity must do so, since so great is the outlay. In writing for pictures, then, we are taught to hold in mind always those members of the Immense Public who cannot really read at all, but who must obtain

their pleasures through sight alone, the same people who compose the crowd at a dedication or a high-dive.

No mercy is shown for honesty, only for cleverness. And here more than elsewhere one must forget immediately to hold as precious those quick thoughts which come to him when shielded by the soft walls of darkness. Such thoughts, the epitome of one's possessions, may be written but cannot be photographed, and so are no good here. They are a waste of time.

But what is not a waste of time here for a writer is the making of contacts. He can forget the sacredness of writing, and should forget it. But he must not forget that anybody with momentary prestige in a studio is to be tagged around like a bitch in heat.



THESE HUGE IRON GATES guarding the entrance here are reminders enough that the world of actuality must be kept strictly outside. Two men in police uniforms stand beside the gates.

The men do not have sawed-off shotguns, but I can envision the shotguns. Also I can visualize other guards with shotguns patrolling the parapets above.

We who by our own wishes are inside here must abide by the laws of the interior. We signed our vow when we signed on the line. Our product will leave this enclosure in circular tins. We could be working in a cannery. We are working in a cannery, all of us. Very well. Let me hold that fact always, and be obedient.

Something has happened to my girl. I cannot carry her along. She has reached the end of a dead-street. But my boy is advancing to the ice-laden waters around Labrador. More action for him is possible up there. The Coast Guard seasonally protects the Great Circle route to Europe. Icebergs, floating down from the north, endanger the liners plying between Europe and America. The Coast Guard patrols the sea-lane and radios the position of these icebergs. I checked on these facts, and yes, I can use them.

But I wish I knew what to do with the girl, and that is why I am walking so slowly within the grounds

of these guarded walls. I could be a monk doing penance for not being able to think faster. Men with whistles are sitting around on boxes. One man whistles first as a signal for the others to whistle likewise, and at the sound of the whistles I must stop. Any trucks moving scenery must stop, also. A scene is being shot somewhere in the locality. We may not know exactly where, but we do know that the whistle signifies the law of this interior.

My girl could go north on her father's yacht. Until now she has had neither father nor yacht, but for the purpose I could give her both. He could be interested in the sciences, he could be a collector of specimens as a hobby. He could want to capture a rare seal.

The whistles sound again, signifying that our world once more may return to motion. God has said it is all right again for our legs to move.

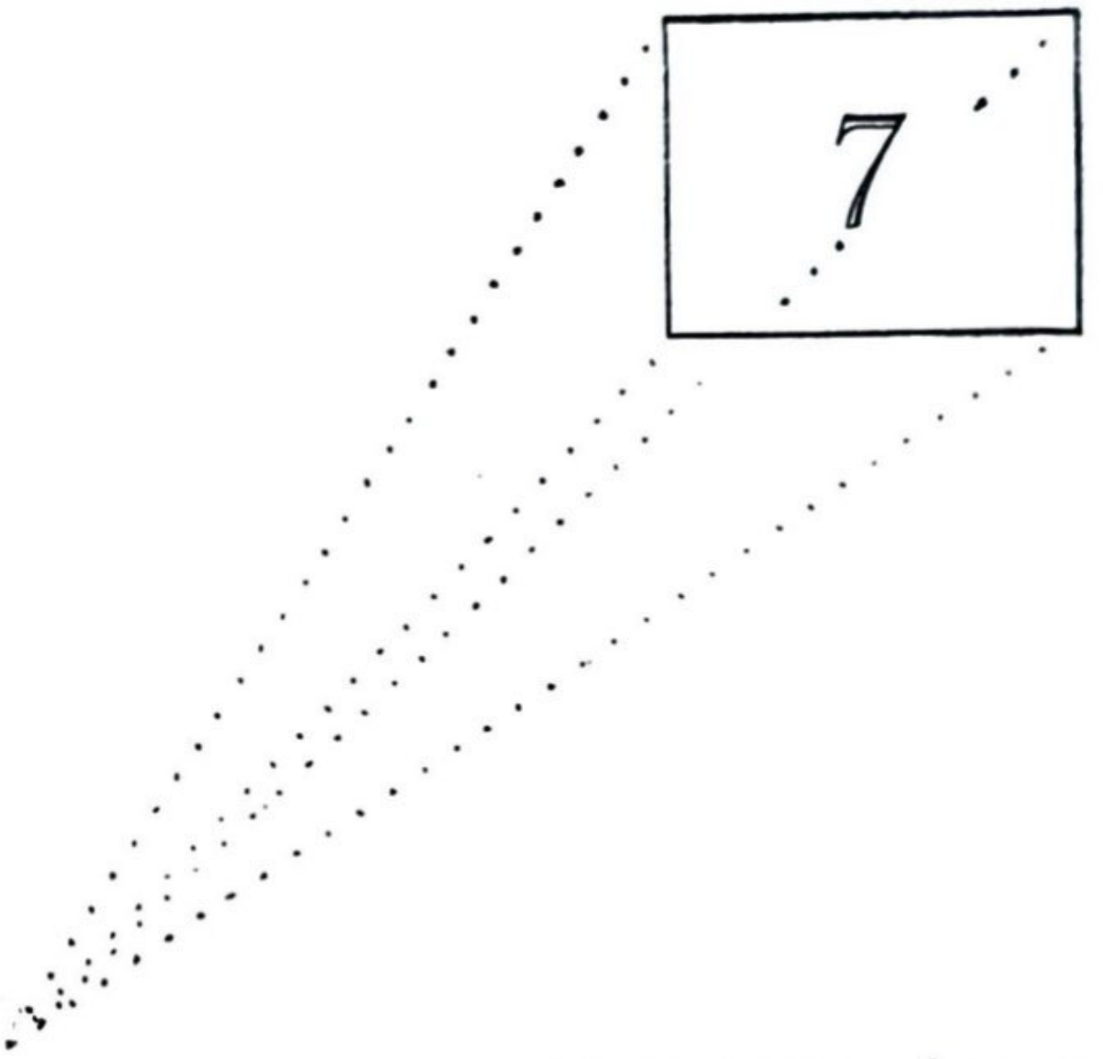
Here I am walking into a French village of real cobblestones. Nobody is in the village. Nobody is anywhere. The village has been built ahead of time, long before mankind arrived on earth as yet to occupy it. But the actual odor of France is here, ahead of time

also. These carpenters are clever. They are more clever than any of us, more clever than the writers, the producers, the actors, more clever than the whole personnel of the Front Office. My check should be divided with these carpenters. I am the day-laborer. They are the creators. We can try to bluff our way through a bad spot, we can try to cover it up by arguing. But they, the carpenters, cannot do this. But even they must feel bewildered at times to see their excellent workmanship torn down after a day's use.

I have wondered why actors accustomed to the theatre-stage so resent being in pictures, and for the first time I think I know. I did not know before, but I think I know now. All of a sudden it seems quite clear as I walk along on these cobblestones. It seems clear because their positions here are the same as mine. Our responsibility here is reduced to the minimum. If my story proves impracticable no lasting harm is committed. A dozen other hands will work at it before it is ready for the canning and the shipping. Other names will be attached to it before it is sent out to the public as a canned commodity.

If an actor here also makes a mistake, no harm is committed, either. The product will be inspected and re-inspected, and if she was too daring or too extraordinary in parts of her performance those parts can be re-filmed. But on the stage, despite the coaching during the rehearsals, she does have that splendid moment when all responsibility is with her. She can experiment directly with the audience. She is, at least for the moment, her own complete boss, her own complete supervisor of herself. She is not something which is handed to the public finally through the safety of a tin-can, circular in shape and flat, and approved by the censors as harmless.

Here I am, far at the other end of the enclosure. Another sentry is sitting by the gate there. No, mister, do not stand up or look surprised. I will not try to escape. I will not try to pass messages through the wire. I will not try in any way to get in touch with the world outside. Just be seated, please. See, already I am turning around to return to Room 19 on the lower floor. Thank you. Yes, I know my place.



THE PRODUCER HAS 'PHONED that he wants to see me. This is the hour, then, the dread of which last night kept me awake. My characters refuse to obtain for themselves any lifelike sub-

stance. He will question me on them, which is his privilege. Another writer here has coached me on a trick to use.

"Don't try to describe your leading character to him," the writer advised. "Go at it this way. Pick out some actor and say your character is like him. This will save the producer the bother of using his imagination because sometimes they are too busy to use any."

But here I go again, falling into the general habit around here of agreeing with anything which in the least way reflects on those who have employed me, who have turned me into a Call Girl with my own consent. Nevertheless, I will do what the writer advised. I will pick out an actor. I will pick out any young actor at random. Gable will do. The very fact that I will pretend to think enough of my story to shoot high may be all the better. Gable is a good man. If he was great in *It Happened One Night* or in *China Seas* he could be great in anything because even my plot could not be more trite than those two.

I put on my necktie and leave the office. The name "Irvin S. Cobb," I notice, is still on the door. A secre-

tary has said it would be changed. But why should it be changed? We are all such transitory tenants. One fictitious name, pulled recklessly out of a hat, would do for all of us. Or like those doorways in the Juarez district our own doors could read: "Bertha," "Rose," "Lilly," "June."

When one has been summoned to confer with his employer, a stranger, how secure do stenographers, office-boys and janitors seem. During such a crisis we positively can hate them for their methodical security. We have been pretending right along to be knowing more than they know, and to be receiving pay ten times over accordingly, and now the bluff is being called on us.

Across from the commissary is the bootblack-stand. One of the negro bootblacks is humming, actually humming, as I come near. The talent for happiness is, I believe, the ability to remain within our own capabilities, and not to try to stretch these capabilities until they threaten to snap under the torture of their own stretching. To try to be more than we are is to stick our necks out for punishment. I am trying to be

more than I am in facing this producer. I know nothing about the talents of jousting with oral words, and am about to face a gladiator whose life has been dedicated to it. The negro bootblack is privileged to hum as I go by. He is entitled to it. He has remained himself. No wisdom could be greater in this respect than his wisdom. Of him I would like to write today in preference to the Coast Guard.

The producer does not keep me waiting. I am bidden to enter his inner office immediately, and he is seated behind his elaborate desk smiling. "See," that smile is telling me without words, "See, I'm not the grouchy person you may have been warned to expect. See, I fully am expecting results from you. I shall smile until you prove otherwise. This is fair of me, you must admit. But you cannot blame me for stopping my smile on discovering that for two days now you have been robbing me, that you have been sitting over there in your office blandly accepting our money for goods you do not possess. Isn't that reasonable, my young man? Very reasonable, I should say."

But his lips move now and words, real words, are

coming from them. He says: "Well, how's it going? What've you got worked out—so far?"

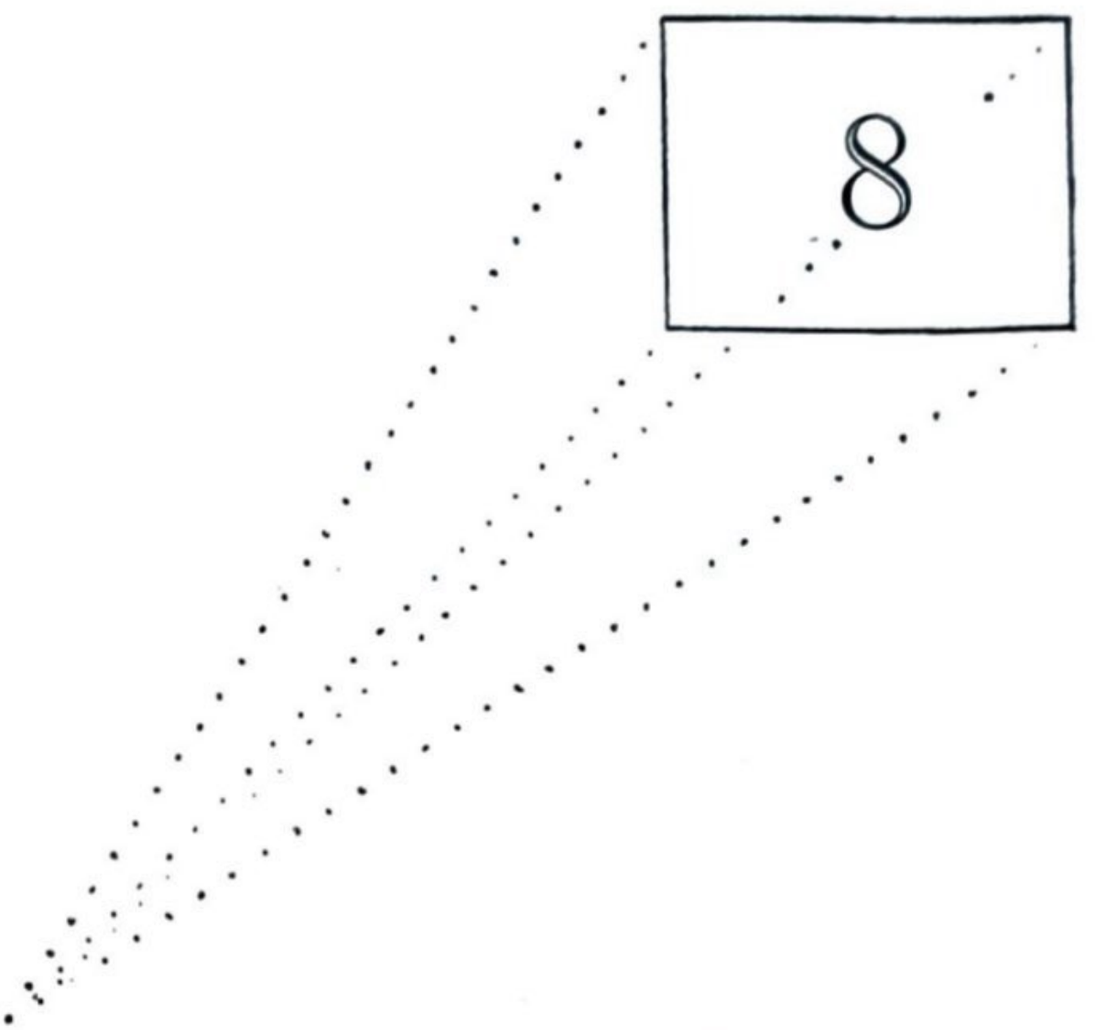
That "so far" is a saving drink of water to me. But he must not notice how all my hope is dependent on them. I, too, must try to be casual. I, too, must try to pretend I am holding much back. Oh, ever so much.

Down in the paved square below the window a group of character-actors and extras are standing in their costumes and make-up. Their faces are painted a bluish brown. No tribes in Africa could quite get such a coloring. The tribes would have chosen an extreme of white or red. But they could not have found a paint which could be human skin and yet not human skin. A borderline coloring it is, making them people and yet again not people. They could have been summoned here by tom-toms for the kill.

"How you coming along?" he repeats.

"I've decided on Gable," I answer. "I've decided on him."

"Oh," the producer drawls. "Mmmmm-m now." And he rises from his desk. He is one gladiator who has no intention of boring the gallery any longer.



8

OCCASIONALLY I THINK THAT the only people who should be working here are the Hollywood agents. This is their town. They are made for it. They seem the happiest when talking in terms of figures, box-office and optimism.

They comprise the one subject with which I am somewhat familiar, though far from a veteran in point of experience with them. For four years now Hollywood agents have corresponded with me and I have corresponded with them.

When they desire somebody for a client they have the pleasing capacity of making that somebody feel as important as a freshman being rushed by a fraternity. Also, after that somebody is finally pledged they have the similar capacity of as promptly forgetting about him. It is, for a fact, like entering university all over again.

"Listen, if you'll let me handle you I'll make you a big man up here inside of a year. There's no sense of you going without money. Other writers are getting it, and getting it plenty. Why, only last week I placed . . . and placed . . . and placed. . . ." The names are given. And it would require a man of greater experience than myself not to regard these agents as the true miracle men.

Sincerity is so rare that when we recognize it even in a fool we become a follower of that fool. This goes

for everything, from politics to religion. And life apparently is a contest in which each person tries to see who can become the most important before he dies.

When talking with a Hollywood agent it is so easy to forget the hard-earned truth learned at home that only on the shore-line alone at night is their actuality, and that all else is false, all else is rickety, all else is gossip.

But strangely enough I am fascinated by these people. They are so skilled with hypnotic cheer that they can make a writer feel the sun is blazing hot when in reality the skies are drenched in rain. It is only afterwards, after a writer has signed an agreement to let them handle his affairs (if he has affairs in Hollywood) that the first doubts begin to penetrate a mind which until now has been quite able to endure having nothing.

"I'll long-distance you next Wednesday for sure," they say. "I've a grand proposition coming up."

Wednesday arrives, but no long-distance. Nothing occurs whatsoever beyond a detraction from one's own work while waiting for the 'phone.

"All right. To hell with it. I didn't want any dealings with Hollywood, anyway." And in this manner a writer once more can forget the existence of the studios.

There is a clause now that if a writer signs with an agent and the agent does not produce work for the writer within four months the contract automatically is cancelled. But it used to be that a writer was sold to his agent for three years. I think that, for the good of a writer's own independent writing, this old rule was the best rule.

Within these three years of silence he could forget once more to dismiss all thoughts of Hollywood, and could concentrate once more on the work for which he had spent years fitting himself. He could forget that, a few miles to the north or east, men were receiving a thousand-a-week for doing less than he was doing now for forty.

But at the end of four months, with the annulling of his agreement, another letter will arrive from another agent, or another personal visit will be made,

or another call will come. And once more a writer will be made Hollywood-conscious.

"Yes, I know you were associated with him and without much success. But he was not the type of man to handle you. He didn't understand your temperament. And besides, you've a new book out by now. But say, getting right down to facts, would you be interested in a thousand-a-week beginning next Monday?"

No poor man living can refrain from being interested somewhat in the sound of a thousand-a-week beginning next Monday. The phrase jingles in one's mind long after the receiver has returned to its hook.

"Well, if you are interested, come up and see me. Make it Friday for sure. Make it Friday at two o'clock. I'll be waiting. I'll arrange the appointment."

Some years ago, when desperately desperate for pennies, I obeyed the impulse of such a timely life buoy. I swam to it.

The agent kept his word. At two o'clock he was waiting. "And now," he said, "I want to introduce

you to the man over at RKO. We'll discuss the whole proposition there. You'll like him."

We moved to the RKO. At a quarter-to-three the man was ready to see us. The agent had predicted the truth, I did like the man. He was sociable and courteous. He said he was glad to meet me and he gave me a cigarette.

The agent who is supposed to do all the talking, who is supposed to act as the buffer between employee and employer, again lived up to his part. In clear tones he stated the mission. He stated: "And by the way, if you have anything Mr. Miller could do here I'd be glad if you could put him on."

The humiliation of such a crash, such a deceit, leaves one standing aware more than ever that he has a body, and that this body has to be removed somehow from the sight of others. Bodies are awkward at best. They are in the way. They are luggage, and yet only in death can one fade away and leave them. But humiliation is not death. It is something worse because a man is still responsible for his box of flesh. I could not simply abandon my body there in the office while

I myself vanished for shelter. I had to take it along too, while backing towards the door nodding, trying to make my body smile.

The agent may have wondered at my silence as we walked along outside towards our car in the parking-place. Finally he grinned and said: "Well, anyway, there's a starter for us. And believe me, it isn't everyone who can crash in and see that man. He's big. I'll follow it up. Meanwhile, there's another studio I want to take you—"

"Don't bother," was the best I could answer, and drove the hundred and twenty miles back home to my own little place, my own rickety typewriter.

But the years are divided into three groups of four months each. Hollywood should have enough writers, one would think, without recruiting into us, the undesirables. We do not fit, and we know it. But we would accept the verdict with far more grace if not for the reminder each four months that a thousand-a-week waits for us up there. "Others are getting it. Why don't you, you fool."

Yet again there are agents and agents. They are dis-

cussed by writers and actors up there with the same prejudice that they would discuss race horses. From overheard discussions I have tried to classify these agents, and finally have concluded they are in two classes. If a writer has a job, his agent is the world's best. The writer or the actor would give his blood in defence of the man. That is one class of an agent. And the other class is the other.

But agents do perform the service of helping to hold wages up beyond the sky. As to that there is no doubt. Working on the basis of ten per cent of what their client makes these agents have no embarrassment in asking for thousands whereas the client, if left on his own, would have been damn well satisfied to work for whatever crumbs the industrial kings would let slip to the floor from their rich table.

One is compelled to salute the good agents up here for their greatness in combat. They are hard to bluff. They know all the answers. Keen in their own powers of bluffing about money, they are quick to sense when the barons are bluffing also. It is a worthy match. An artist would accept anything here, the same as the

world over they accept anything. But here where money is the only gauge of one's ability, the agents fight for their clients to receive their share of the income instead of having all of it go to the stockholders. Without agents, Hollywood's payroll would be as lopsided in this respect as the payroll of newspapers.

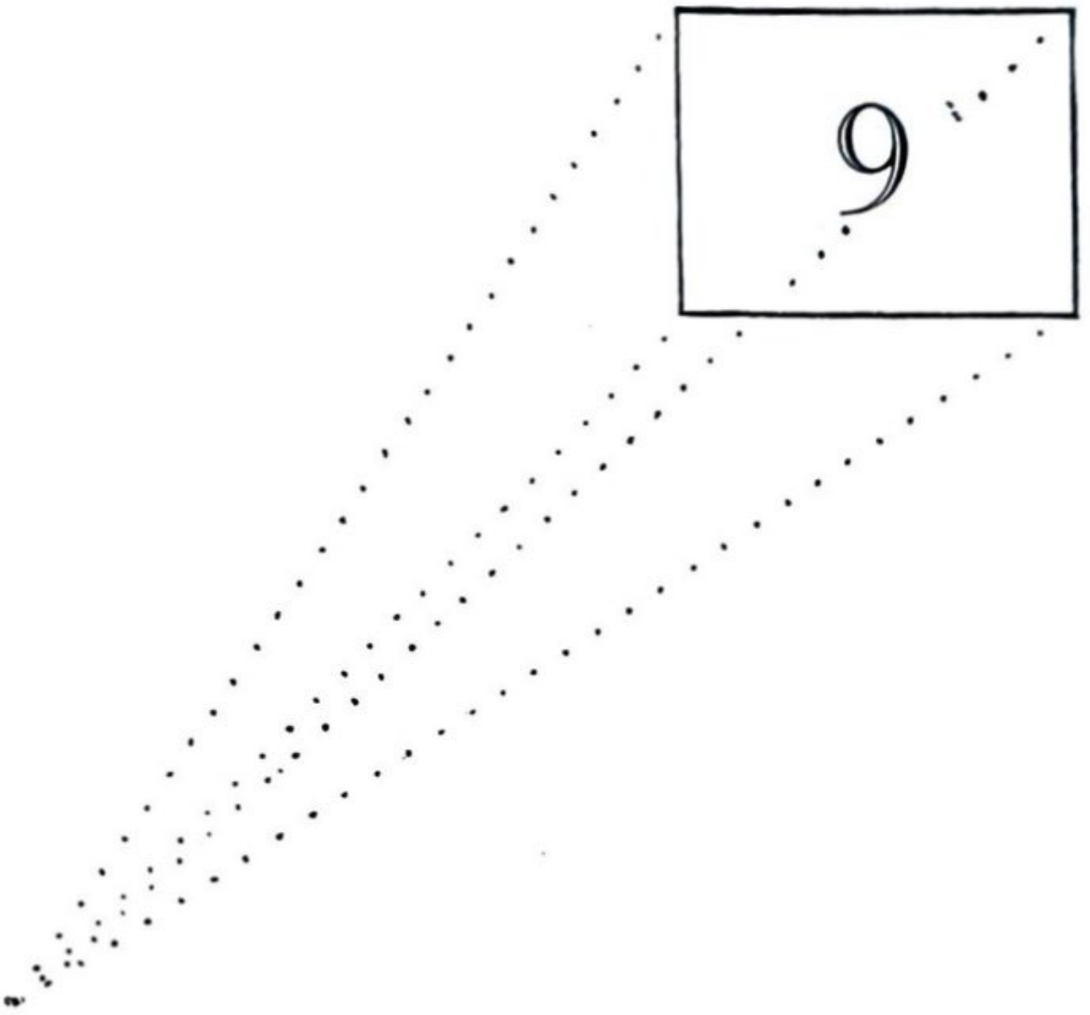
Because each agent handles so many actors and writers and because he collects ten per cent each week from those who are working, he has only to have ten clients working to receive as much as they receive individually. But the fact that he can do this is a super-art of his own making, requiring a cold eye, a memory of names, and the ability to make three zeros grow ahead of a decimal point whereas ordinarily there would have been only one.

Also, after talking with an agent and after hearing him rattle off such phrases as we-got-twenty-thousand-for-that-story or we-just-placed-him-at-fifteen-hundred-a-week I can always return back to my little home fully convinced that money is still left in the world. And I will for that matter feel safe in buying shoes at four dollars instead of my customary

three-fifty. Agents can for a fact instil into a simple mind the spirit of recklessness.

Up here, then, there is really two of me working today. I am a dual person. There is that tenth of me, the agent, who can talk only in terms of money. He is the practical side. I can call this side of me into action merely by 'phoning him. All of us have dual natures, no doubt, but all are not so fortunate in being able to summon the other side of our natures so conveniently.

Practicability may refuse to come when we need it most. We may be sentimental at the exact time we should be hard. But up here we have no such trouble, as the practical side of our nature lives at a definite street address. This is simply one more item, then, to be added to the strangeness here.



9

THE ACTRESS IS IN MY OFFICE saying: "I had been warned to watch out for him. He knows all the tricks and would steal the scene from his own grandmother's funeral. But do you know what he just did?"

No, I did not know.

She was still bewildered by what had occurred.

"When he and I were rehearsing a shot before the cameras he whispered: 'Watch out where you stand. See, if you stand there I throw a shadow across you.' Now, I say, wasn't that splendid of him?"

I presume it was, although I have not been here long enough to appreciate the full significance of such gallantry.

"And here all the time," she adds, "I had been told he was a son-of-a-bitch."

So far, up here I have seen little of actors. The featured players are driven through the iron gates in the morning and then disappear. I could trail them to their workshops, of course, to watch them on duty. But this is not what I am paid to do. Also, it is startling with what speed we forget about them being other than simply workers here too.

Some of them are always in the commissary eating lunch when we are there. But then, also, are the stenographers, some of the directors, some of the camera-men, some of the stage-fitters. A few of all of us

are always gathered there at noon, since food is the one object none of us can avoid. It brings us all together the same as a water-hole brings together all the varied creatures of the wild, from the zebra to the rabbit, from the giraffe to the mouse.

And all of us, in retreating back to our respective haunts in this jungle, resume once more those intricate tricks which we have taught ourselves for prolonging our survival.

Yet so engrossed is each of us in trying to outwit the enemies of our own immediate field that we feel, perhaps, that no other animal in the whole veldt has quite the troubles we have to combat. How simple, for instance, does it seem to be an actor. Everything is thought out for him, I say to myself in these moods. The writers provide him with his lines. The directors tell him how they should be said. His clothes are provided him by the costume-shop here on the grounds. And the camera-men and electricians do the rest of the work. All he has to do is stand there, one would say off-hand, and behave indignantly or happily or shocked or whatever is registered in the script for

him to do. How sublime, and yet how all the fuss is made about him. There would be the life, I say, if only one could stomach the idea of having paint on his face.

An actor truly must be God's blessed little child with nothing to worry about. But today, on hearing this actress talking to me, I become mindful of the Mexicans' interpretation of that ancient legend as recorded by Harry Carr in his book, *Old Mother Mexico.*

Everyone in a small village long ago was complaining so about the cross he had to bear that a saint came along and invited each to throw his cross into a pile outside the village. "And now," the saint said to the villager who had been complaining the most, "you can return to the pile and make your own personal choice of the cross you want to carry."

The man was so pleased that he lost no time running out to the heap. He wanted to get there before anyone else did. He saw the most tiny and lightest cross, and quickly snatched it for himself. He said to the saint: "This is the one I'll carry."

"Very good," the saint replied. "But it's exactly the same one you had before."

I may not have quoted the legend correctly, but the general idea is sufficient to cause me to examine once more the weight of my own diminutive cross before I would throw it away in exchange for the cross of an actor. Or of a director. Or of a production-manager. Or of a producer. Even the cross of the producer for whom I am working. His cross may be loaded with pig iron.

"What other tricks do you have to watch out for?" I ask the actress.

"Do you know the most common one of all?"

"I know none of them," I answer. "It's all a blank to me."

She tells me that the most common trick between actors competing on the same scene is for one of them to walk backwards ever so imperceptibly while the other actor is talking to the one moving backwards. This causes the actor with the lines to speak to move the back of his head to the camera in order to continue talking to the actor moving backwards. Mean-

while the backward-moving actor retains the full glory of a full front view to the camera.

"But I know how to stop that," she says.

"How?"

"By moving backwards with him while I talk. And if necessary I can ever so subtly stick one foot out behind him to hold him in place or else trip him backwards onto his fanny."

"Did you ever do it?"

"Not quite. But once when two of us were fighting to steal a balcony scene we both backed away so far that both of us damn near fell over the banister. But it was all right with me, the rat. I would have backed with her all the way out to the alley if the director hadn't of called: 'See here, sister, come up and rejoin the party. I'm not taking a telescopic shot.' "

Also she tells me of the difficulty of tests. I had been unable to understand why experienced picture actors on this lot always were summoned to a face-test before being given a part in a coming picture. All the world knows by now how these actors appear on the screen. So why, I wondered, must they be

photographed all over again so the producer could see them before casting them. "Where has he been all this time?" I ask her. "Up in the Bering Sea?"

"Oh, no, it's not exactly that," she answers. "Tests are just a lot more hooey, to be sure. But the producer and casting director want to see how we look in the costumes for the part. That's about all. They can't use their imagination. If they've seen us playing a tart, they think we can't play anything else except a tart. Or if they've seen us as a sweet and innocent, we're filed away as a sweet and innocent for ever."

"Just like us writers with our salaries, I suppose?" This means that our salary is our classification. It's our brand. It stays.

"You've said it. The same idea. Only with these tests you don't know anything about torture till you have one."

"I'll not be having one."

"What I mean," she continues, "is that we're stuck up before a camera and told to say something. Once in a while we're given the script the night before and can pick out our own lines. But usually we're just stuck

up there and told what to say. If we happen to hit it right we get the part. But if we don't happen to know what it's about, whether we're supposed to be Swedes or Dagos—oh well, we'll just be out of work for another two months. Do you catch on?"

"Probably."

"Nobody likes tests. The camera-men don't like to make them. The electricians don't like to set up their stuff for them. And all we've got to talk to is a table or a chair. But if the electricians or camera-men happen to like us, we may get by. They're the real big shots around this joint, let me tell you. They're the little boys who can turn stones into fishes, if I make myself clear."

"How much do tests cost the studio?"

"Not less than three hundred dollars each. But to hell with the studio. It's what they cost us in grief."

She is standing there in slacks. Actresses seem to prefer to wear them to work. They save time in dressing and re-dressing while on the grounds. She glances at her wrist watch.

"It's like this, you know," she says, in starting quickly for the door. "God is love. Good-bye."

10

WHEN ONE IS SUBMERGED in a great city by overwhelming hopelessness the sky-scrapers around him no longer are regarded for their charm or their architecture or their nobility. Rather

they stick up there to taunt him of his own unfitness.

"See what other men, no different in body than you, have been able to do with themselves in this confusion. They have crawled out of the mess and have obtained such control of themselves that they could build these mountains. And you—what can you do? All you can do is still walk around in the crowds bewildered."

In this same sense, from the bottom looking up, I now regard those few great artists up here who have managed to construct a complete institution for the self-expression of their genius.

I am thinking, for instance, of Chaplin.

The flood of debris could have drowned him the same as it already has drowned me in less than a week. Had he remained dependent on pleasing his employers, the same as I am dependent on trying to please them, Chaplin today would be just another well-paid actor doing his two or three pictures a year.

But today he is in a position to express himself as fully as any independent writer working at home. He is, in fact, an independent writer working at home.

He can carry the germ of a first idea clear on through to the very end. It need not be tampered with by other writers, by other directors, by other producers, not even by others' budgets. He can stand or fall by his own workmanship exclusively. He is, for a certainty, a building.

Under such circumstances only could anyone up here call himself a creator without blushing. There may be other poets, but their poems are finally completed with one line being written by one poet, the next line by another, and on down through the sonnet this way. The result may rhyme, it may have meter, but in no sense does the completed work have that individuality so essential for classicism. The last line may be an absolute contradiction to the purpose of the man who had written the first line, who had started it.

But to write one's story, to supervise the photography of one's story, to act one's story, to finance one's story, and finally to see one's story ready for shipment to Asia, to Europe and throughout the Americas—only in that way can I understand how any

artist on earth could have satisfaction working up here.

Chaplin must not know I am in this studio office writing a boy-and-girl story to order. This would be the greatest insult I could give him for the interest he has shown me towards my own writing while at home.

"So you, too, can be bought," he would be excused for saying. He would be excused also for destroying those books of mine which I had hoped would remain documents, pledges, that always I would be sincere. Yet here I am today, doing trick writing among the trickiest. And all for the creosoting of a roof which now, this moment, I would prefer had continued leaking at each sprinkle. Nothing of value was under that roof capable of being harmed by rain, anyway. Nothing was under there except an empire.

In defence I can try telling myself: "But cheer up. Chaplin was not always the independent man he is now, either. Starting from scratch in an orphan's home he also had to work according to orders many, many years. Isn't that so? He would say so himself."

Yes, that is true in texture, but not in spirit. I am only trying to fool myself with these words. He did not let others rule his art a moment longer than was necessary. When he finished his apprenticeship, when he learned the rules of the road, he did not for his own safety's sake cling to the harborage of others, letting them take the responsibility. He deals in millions now, that is true. But his game calls for millions. My work called for only a few dollars each month, enough to live on, and somehow I was receiving them.

No matter what excuse I use about being poor, that is not the reason I am up here in this studio. I am up here because I wanted a few dollars superfluous. Greed is the word. And tomorrow this superfluity will turn into a need. To meet this need I will become a hack. A hack with an overhead! That is the definition of all of us.

To meet this enlarging overhead we must remain and remain. The time becomes too late to make a break for it. We allow ourselves to become entangled supporting others who, if we had not existed, could well have managed to support themselves regardless.

They had ignored us easily enough when we were reporters. And when reporters we at least could deal with fact. We were not the hacks we are now.

This girl and this boy are not fact. They are not even legitimate fiction. I know what will occur to them in the end even before they are created. There is only one thing which can occur to them. Love. Or what up here is used to symbolize love. It can be a hug or a tear or a smile, or even the marriage ceremony itself.

So! With the beginning started, and with the ending guaranteed, my story should be half completed. All I have to do now is to fill in the dots between these two objects. The Coast Guard is the vehicle but not the purpose. It also must be bent to comply with love.

Creation has done its best to amuse those of us drawn out of the void to be created. To begin, we are placed on a spinning ball surrounded by other uncontrollable spinning balls—a gigantic roomful of toys, to be sure—and on our own spinning ball are colors, oceans, atmosphere, mountains, earthquakes, fires,

tides, plants, beasts and other living things like ourselves beyond number. If we are bored amid all this dizziness the fault is not the lack of things to play with, but the fault is we have too much to play with, a continual Christmas morning in the nursery. But in pictures all these other items are useless, are beneath notice, unless tied together somehow by the triviality of a young man trying to marry a girl or a girl trying to marry a young man.

Unlike the appreciation of certain books for the very reason that they can lift us out of our bodies, making us forget the importance of our bodies for a while, a picture-audience must under no circumstances be permitted to forget that the body is paramount and that two bodies uniting or preparing to unite is paramount supreme.

Groans are the same in any language. So is laughter. So too is coupling. And since the peoples of all lands understand breeding or the preliminaries for breeding, any producer who would neglect to remember that the only sensation most people can comprehend is the sensation relative to these body-events—that

same producer is inviting himself to a boxoffice disaster.

This common denominator absolutely must be in all stories, since it can be understood as well by the mentally retarded as by the greatest of scientists. And the outlay on each picture in the studio is too big to risk missing the admission quarters of either.

In my story today I would like to work in an amphibian hospital plane as operated by the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard Academy itself in New London, Conn., the work of patrolling the iceberg section of the Great Circle route, the rescue of passengers off a burning liner, the resuscitation drills held on the hull of an upturned lifeboat, gunnery practice—all these and more I would like to get into the story if it is to show the Coast Guard. Yet under no circumstances must they be in the story, I remind myself again, if they do not further the love theme between the boy and the girl.

Likewise, I must manufacture a heavy. He must be either another man or another woman. He or she must be there to interfere with the girl and the boy becoming married right away. The heavy must be there as

an obstruction. Yet how few of us in our own lives have obstructions preventing us from becoming married the moment after we become so inclined. We may have economic obstructions, to be sure, but we ignore them. Never have I known of a villain in the form of a man or woman who stands there like a fence saying: "Step over me first before marriage is yours." Relatives may attempt to be this villain, but relatives usually are all. And if a hero pays any attention to them other than to kick them out of the way he is not a hero. At least he is not worthy of being the hero of a masculine story such as this should be.

Who, then, shall I have for the heavy? Who, then, shall I create especially to be hated? He could be another rival in the Coast Guard. Or he could be another girl at home who simpers.

But whoever such a one is I must apologize to him before germinating him. I must say: "Listen here, old fellow, I'm going to bring you temporarily on earth just to be hated. Would you want to live under those conditions or would you prefer remaining as you are, unborn. Yet there is no need you answering me be-

cause I am going to place you on earth for a moment regardless. That is how we do business here, my fellow."

The 'phone rings. I answer it. The producer's secretary announces that the producer wants to know how I am coming along with my story.

"Tell him it's coming along all right," I say. "Tell him I have the end in mind."

This is safe, since we have the end in mind always. And if I had been smart I could have told him the end before.

But now, after the ringing of the 'phone, I try to recapture the villain and hold him in irons till through with him. But he has eluded me. He has vanished back to the void. Many characters out there in the void are willing to be used, to be given bodies, if they can be liked. But few want to come to earth just to be despised. They would prefer to remain where they are.

Two other writers are walking by the window. One of them is talking loudly, using his hands:

"If she says to him: 'Get out of here!' and he

doesn't get out, she has a right to call the station. Sure she has."

"But she wouldn't, Bo. She'd be afraid they'd take her, too. Can't you see the spot she's in? There in that cheap hotel?"

"Forget the spot for a minute, can't you. Christ's sake. Where'd we get if we didn't try something—"

The two are beyond the window now, and their voices fade into indistinctness down the walk.

Would Melville, Thackeray, George Eliot, France, Whitman, Hugo, Byron, Goethe, Balzac or any of them talk like that, too, if they were here? The answer, so far as I can guess, is yes. But first, before coming to it, I would allow them about a week.

11

THIS PLEASANT WOMAN from upstairs who does adaptations is sitting in my office smoking a cigarette and telling me not to take the life so seriously.

"You know," she says, "we have all agreed that we should have a motto framed on all our walls reading: AFTER ALL, IT'S ONLY ANOTHER PICTURE."

This is true enough. It is only a picture. But we can be as brave as the bravest talking among ourselves this way. Yet the stakes are so high they overshadow any enthusiasm I could muster in myself for the work itself. Truly, I remain more wage-conscious than story-conscious.

Each day that I remain here, I continue thinking, I am storing away enough potatoes, enough oatmeal, enough coffee to endure me a month in my own tiny kingdom by the shore-line.

"After all, it's only another picture." How recklessly this can be tossed off by those who have been here two years or more. I used to talk the same way to youngsters who for the first time were trying to work on the newspaper.

"What the hell," I would whisper to them on seeing their agonized faces. "Don't mind what the city editor just said to you. He doesn't mean the half of it.

And besides, what's a news-story more or less. It's forgotten by tomorrow."

This is the one splendor of being veterans, the splendor of being in a position to show off to the recruits. We cherish the opportunity of pretending to be indifferent, come what may.

Yet again, few of us relish the idea of failing in any undertaking, be it tennis or be it this job of trying to put the spark of life into two synthetical characters associated with the Coast Guard.

This pleasant woman from upstairs continues to tell me about a director who, having returned from a month's vacation, vowed he would not dare take a vacation again.

"It's too dangerous to go away," the director had said to her. "When I was in the midst of it here I had forgotten how silly it was to be thinking up nothing but gags and gags. I actually had presumed they were an accomplishment. But after I had gone away and could look back—God help me."

"But if there are so few happy people around here," I ask her, "why don't they save out a year's stake and

go to a cabin somewhere and live the rest of their lives on a hundred a month? It can be done, you know, easily."

"Can it? Don't be so simple. It could be for you, of course, because you're not broken in yet. But after you've been here a year, you try living on a hundred a month. You just try it."

"But listen here, nobody in the world can spend a thousand a week like some of these writers get. It can't be done. It isn't arithmetic."

"Oh, so it can't be done." With this remark she rises from the chair, smashes out her cigarette in my ash-tray, and turns towards the door.

Before closing the door behind her she says: "It wouldn't be a bad plan if you got out of here by tomorrow."

And so it goes. First these friends arrive to encourage me. Then they depart by telling me that even if I should succeed somewhat the success will leave me worse off than ever before.

From what I have seen already, it is quite obvious

that these studios hold their talent in slavery by the wealth of their own wages, whereas on the newspaper the system of retaining employees was exactly the reverse.

Yet one way to beat the game, I should think, would be to disappear from sight the hour after leaving the grounds each night and to go live in the equivalent of a cave somewhere, and there fiendishly count one's gold nightly as a miser would do. And then, after the bag is filled, to return to the land of one's own thoughts again.

But that would not be human, though. It would invite one to be hated, and nobody cares to be hated. Instead, I probably would buy a new car on payments rather than just a new top for my present one. Next I would want an apartment here instead of a hotel room. And next I would want a house. And next I would want a man to care for the grounds around the house. And next I would want . . . and want . . . and want . . . and likewise obtain. It would lead finally to such a daily overhead that I would be no different

from the rest of the writers around here. I, too, would be waiting from week to week for my check the same as in those reporter days when my weekly overhead was all of twenty dollars. I too would be dependent on the whims of these Goliaths over me. I can see now what the woman from upstairs meant.

My story will not develop at this rate, though. If I had been receiving only fifty a week my story may have been all written by now. But the immensity of the salary has magnified the immensity of the script. I am like a batter who, with two outs and the bases full in the last inning, steps to the plate to find himself muscle-bound by his own critical importance.

Perhaps if I take another stroll outside in the air it may help, it may loosen me up. I know each corner of these grounds already, huge though they are within this fence. But in the further corner is an artificial lake built, not for beauty, but to resemble a waterfront for exterior shots.

A tugboat is constructed in the water. There is no bottom to the tug, for it rests only a few feet down on the cement. But the water is so discolored that the

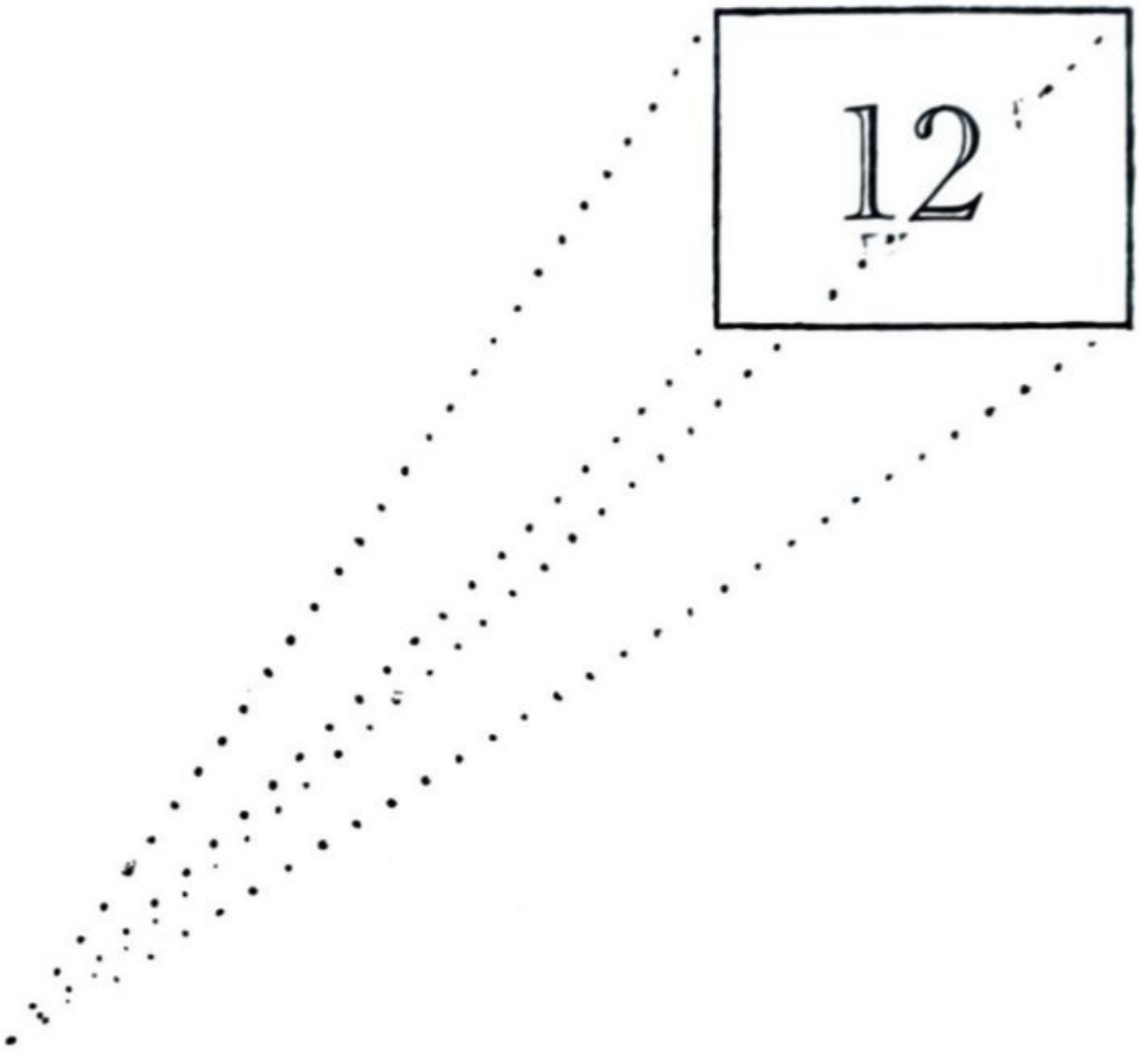
camouflage cannot be seen. Also one side of the tug, the side opposite the camera-scaffoldings, is not completed at all. It is wide open except for a few two-by-fours for props. They are as bright and clean and as un-seagoing as the two-by-fours in a new house just being built. Nevertheless, I go there. Since water, even artificially pooled water like this, has something. It is the one materialistic suggestion I can find within these walled office grounds mindful of my own unfenceable ocean at home. In the same spirit somebody yanked suddenly from a forested country to live on a tree-less prairie would probably regard a growing tumbleweed.

But today the water-hole is occupied. Orders are being given for the re-vamping of the outdoor set. No cameras are there today, though, and so I feel safe to approach. I light a cigarette and I think: "Indeed, this is another remarkable job of carpentering. I should say it is."

Yet I am not being paid to meander around the grounds this way watching others at work, even though the work is over a pool of water. My place is

back in Room 19, Lower Floor, Writers Building.

So, I turn to return there. For what the hell. If already I have forfeited an ocean, it is simple to forfeit a mud-puddle.



A WRITER I HAVE KNOWN A long time is here, also. He has been stationed in the wing of another building. I did not know he was on the grounds.

"I saw your name in the new studio directory," he says. "Was I surprised. What you working on?"

I tell him.

"What they paying you?"

I tell him.

"God, but you're a sap. Do you know you could be getting twice as much?"

No, I did not know that.

"Sure," he emphasizes. "The bigger price you put on yourself the more they want you."

"It sounds good in theory."

"Whatever they offer you, double it. You're a sucker."

Was this a game, too? Are we supposed to be discontented with our salaries? I actually believe we are. I actually believe we are supposed to live in lasting discontent because we are not receiving as much as someone else is receiving. And for such discontent, once it starts, there could be no saturation point. Our weekly checks are but pennies compared to the checks of those above us. And they in turn must have their eyes on the men who receive a half-million a year.

And those who are receiving a half-million probably feel offended, injured, slighted and sided-against because they are not earning a million and a half a year.

"Look," I attempt to say, "you know and I know that neither of us is worth a tenth of what we are receiving. What in hell you trying to do? Make me cry?"

"Suit yourself. But all I'm telling you is that you're a sap to be getting only what you're getting. And I'll tell you why. Do you want to know why?

"I'll tell you. It's like this—"

What he tells me is something which already I had learned in part, that we are graded, not by our ability in pictures, but by the salaries listed after our names. We are classified as $250-a-week writers, $500-a-week writers, $750-a-week writers, and so on up to the top. The studios maintain a lasting record of what salaries are paid whom, and the grading stays.

"Let me tell you it does," he continues. "Do you think now that you could walk over to the Warner lot or over to the Twentieth Century-Fox lot or over to the Paramount lot and say your price is a thousand-

a-week? Try and do it. They'll ask over there, 'Where did you ever receive a thousand-a-week?' And believe me, you're stuck. That 'phone will ring so fast to this lot that you'll not have time to take out a toothpick."

Here is one profession, then, in which it does not pay to be an apprentice, or to say we would like to learn the business from the bottom and work up, although we who have done all our writing on the outside are the greenest of apprentices here. Our salaries on entering may be higher than those who have been writing for pictures since the beginning, yet in actuality we know less about writing for pictures than do the cutters in the cutting-room.

We dare not suggest to a producer: "See here, sir, I admit I'm new at this film-writing business. So better start me low and increase my wages as I go along. A hundred-a-week for the first weeks will do, I should think."

If we should become so spectacular, of course, with an astonishing box-office success that other studios might want us, our salaries possibly might be raised to meet the competition from outside. But it would have

to be done immediately, and the success would have to coincide miraculously with the expiration of our original contract, for a success does not remain long in memory up here. Two following mediocre pictures can kill the first. Or even one mediocre picture can kill it.

No writer is truly a writer unless in his heart he strives to leave something, some thought, some observation entirely his own be it ever so minute. If he does not have this striving he is a gossip, a catch-as-catch-can performer, a journalist. He is a rowboat content for the moment to cut a wake which within a matter of seconds is covered over again, leaving utterly no record of the passing. And that is one more reason why at heart we are not writers here. We not only leave nothing permanent, but we know ahead of time before starting a work that the work will not be permanent, that it will not even outlast the year. This sensation of having definitely agreed to be nonentities is the first sensation one must try to drown within himself for the glory of being In The Money.

"Anyway, you sure lost your chance for twice as

much," my visitor continues. "It'll not come again. That salary of yours will stick with you forever and I'm not lying."

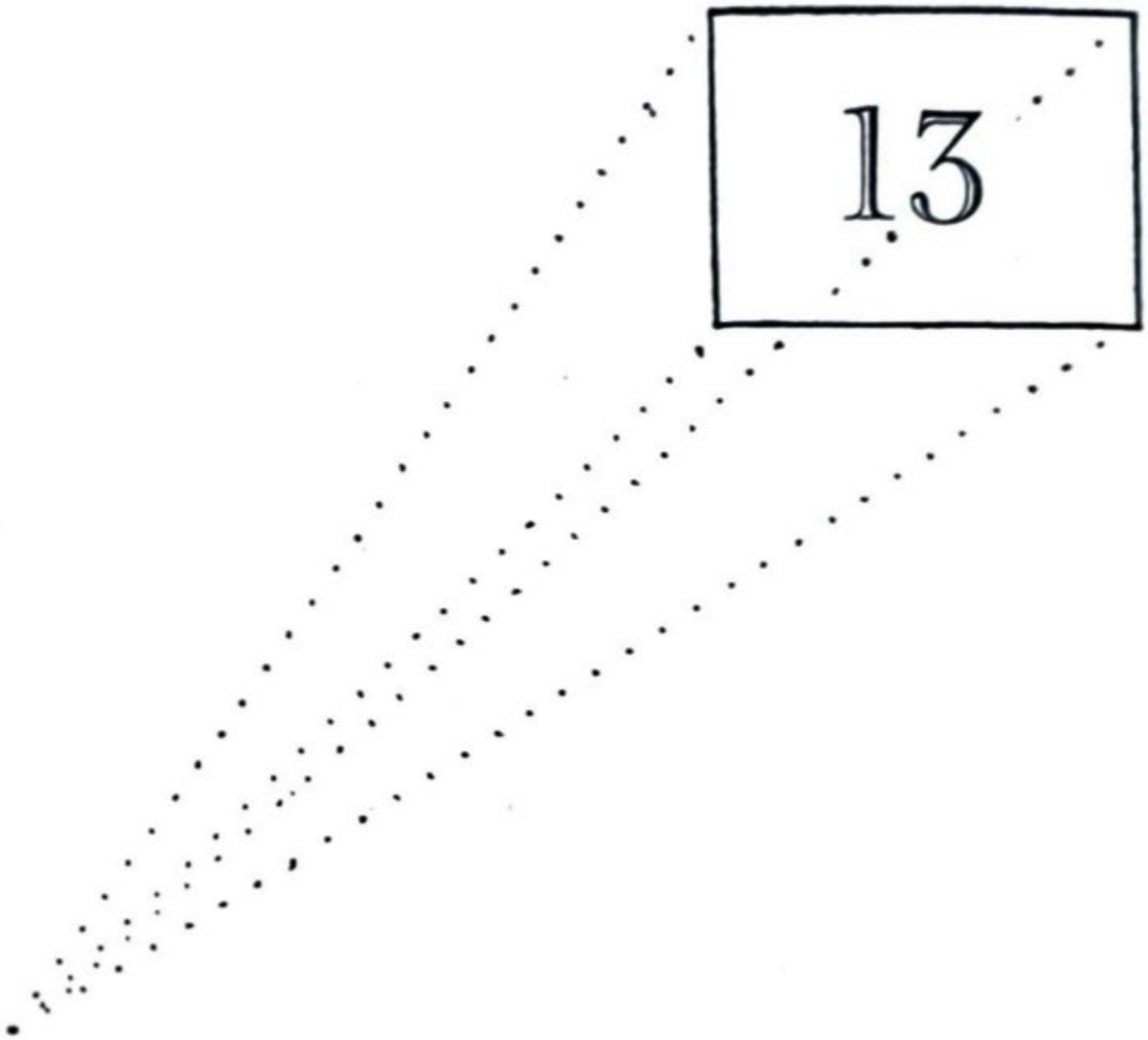
"All right, you're not lying, I admit it. But just the same–"

"Just the same you can see now why you're a sap."

He glances at the notes I have been scribbling. "What are those?"

"Notes."

"Jesus Christ, that's what secretaries are for!"



I SOMETIMES THINK THAT the reason we writers up here are so fond of talking, are so fond of expressing our opinions orally, is because conversations afford us the only outlet for expressing ourselves at all.

In newspapers we could not wholly express ourselves either, of course, whether writing a column or writing editorials. We may not have admitted it at the time, but sub-consciously we undoubtedly held in mind the paper's pet policies to watch and remember. But these policies did not vary with the censor rules of each of the forty-eight States.

And when one adds all these censor-rules they literally occupy a volume of mimeographed sheets. Up here we are advised to read them and memorize them. Certain words can be used in some States and not in others. The same naturally is true of scenes, so that by the time we have gone through these great lists we feel so overweighed by what we cannot do that it is surprising we can do anything.

This enslavement is not so baffling to those writers up here who have written only for pictures always, and for nothing else. But to those of us who have had the sweet taste of freedom afforded by book-writing the sensation here is almost the same as suddenly being confined in a penal institution the corridors of which

are plastered everywhere with DON'TS. We become Don't-conscious.

Yet I cannot understand why some of us who, not caring to write all the rest of our lives to the policies of some editor or newspaper-chain, learned to write for ourselves only to throw overboard this liberty up here.

While the rest of the reporters after working hours played poker or visited the glad houses we returned from the office to our room to thump away on our typewriters in the hope that someday we could write our way into at least partial independence of thought. Yet here today the studios are filled with those of us who somewhat succeeded.

While reporters we had presumed that liberty of expression was the world's greatest richness. Yet the waving of dollars in front of us was all that was needed to cause us to drop this theory in a hurry.

To be told what to do, what to think, and to be told how soon to have it thought out, is exactly where we are again. We are back at the beginning. Here one cannot have a thought, in fact, unless it is officially

okeyed as such by an overseer. If an overseer does not okey it, then it was not a thought. It does not stand. It was a nothing.

And now to see some of these writers, once so brilliant in their own independent world, working here is as repulsive as observing full-grown men sitting in kindergarten seats cutting out paper tulips and desperately anxious for teacher to give them a good grade. If these full-grown men had undergone an accident retarding their brains, one would have sympathy for them naturally. But here they are still in full possession of their faculties. Yet for us now to call ourselves writers is blasphemy to the earth's greatest profession. We may have been writers once, but now we are something else for which so far there is no name.

Why, that little man back there in the hometown who makes his living catching catfish is more noble than we are. He may be illiterate, he may be considered an unambitious no-good, but nobody stands over him telling him just how and when to dip his oars each dip. Nor does he have to fish according to

the censors of forty-eight States. Nor before making a decision does he have to run to the Front Office and there sit to wait his turn to ask if it were all right for him to think the way he had thought.

Yet in time of war we would be the first to slaughter others in the name of liberty, we would be the first to carry banners for it, and we would give our own lives for it. But to give up the chance of earning an extra dollar in preference of retaining liberty is asking us to give up too much.

And so, as is natural with people who are hemmed in with restrictions, we take our fretfulness out in talking. We become real brave with words so long as they are oral. And the words we use for emphasis are the extreme ones, the kind we would spank our sons for saying. But we use them with vengeful vigor, because through their use we have a feeling of once more being daring, of once more being unbridled. With oral words and oral opinions we presume once more that we are masters of ourselves. Through them we can feel once again a taste of that grand feeling when we were masters of our actions, also.

It does not take much to set us talking. Nor does it take much to ignite us into arguments which would be mistaken for violence anywhere but here.

Our arguments do not have to be logical. They do not have to contain any sense whatsoever. No meditation is required for opinions. They will never be tested by the public. They will seldom reach outside the room where they were uttered. We may have mental intercourse but it is performed with a contraceptive. Nothing will come of it, nothing will endure from it, because it dare not be recorded to stand on its own either in our pictures or in our writings. But the only requirement for an opinion is to have one, and to have it impromptu, and to have it if possible in direct contradiction to the opinion which went before.

Last night I was at a dinner in which the film *Broadway Bill* was mentioned. At this dinner of a few picture-writers we had been too sociable too long. We needed fury. The suppression of our day's work should not be carried through into the evening, likewise. We were being too agreeable. Why, by the way we behaved, one would presume we were all outside

writers who had spent the day in the satisfaction of our own self-expression and now were content just to eat and let the world go on. This would never do. The mention of *Broadway Bill* started us off. Anything at all would have started us off.

Frank Capra, the director of *Broadway Bill*, was not present. But there was not one of us but who admired this young man whose personal genius had pulled through to glory such tipsy-topsy plots as *It Happened One Night*, *Lady For A Day* and so on. But the story for *Broadway Bill* was even worse than any of these.

"But I tell you he had to have the horse die at the end of the race. If he hadn't've had the horse die what would he have had die? He had to have something die."

"Applesauce, sister. That horse didn't either have to die."

They pounded on the table, and tried to out-shout one another.

"Listen, you eggs. I was in the conference when we decided to have the horse die. Look, if it hadn't've

died what would the audience've had? It would've had a horse race, that's all."

"Pardon my Mongolian, but I say nuts to all of you. I say when the horse died it made heavies out of the girl and the boy and the old man. That's what it did. It turned them right around into the heavies."

"If you think we didn't have to kill the horse, then what do you think the box-office would think? There you are. That's the answer. It would think it was just another phony."

"It WAS just another phony."

"You're so crazy your ears stick out. Frank had to kill the horse to save the picture."

"He didn't either. When he killed the horse he double-crossed the audience. That's no way to save a picture, to double-cross the audience."

"Who said so?"

"I said so."

"Who are you? The horse?"

It continued this way, the formal dinner having been turned into such a free-for-all that an outsider would have presumed the guests would have risen

from the table not to speak to one another ever again.

But I as yet am not accustomed to this habit of turning all conversations into arguments. I still operate up here under the fallacy that men mean what they say. When a host makes a statement and I agree with him I forget that in so doing I am robbing him of an evening's outlet, that I am doing him an injustice.

And because I had remained silent so long during this verbal display, my own silence attracted attention. Finally somebody at the table burst out at me with the suddenness of firing a pistol in my face: "Capra should've killed the horse, shouldn't he of!"

The faces of my peers, two rows of them, wheeled around to stare at me then. Why they should have thrown all their faith into me as the judge merely because I had been remaining silent I did not know then. I do not know now.

"I haven't seen the picture," I answered humbly.

"Oh hell, I haven't either," came the answer. "But that's not the question."

14

WE HAVE NO NEED HERE OF reading the cosmopolitan papers. We have our own dailies, four or five or six or maybe seven of them, and each morning they are placed in a row for sale on

the cement bulkhead opposite the commissary entrance.

These trade papers supply us with all we need to know for existence in our world. They supply us with what pictures are going to be made, with what pictures are being finished, with who has been seen with whom lately, and with who has been hired for what, and if such made money in the box-office where, and what was said to whom in conference yesterday, and how who walked out of his contract when.

Outside somewhere is another world, but it is very tiny, and its news is of no concern to us. But if we are foolish enough to be interested, the gateman will let us step outside on the street long enough to snatch a regular newspaper off the sidewalk beside a telephone-pole there. It is reasonable that these cosmopolitan newspapers should not be sold inside the lot. They may confuse us, they may interfere with the importance of our work, they may incite in us the possibility that the world outside is larger than our own.

But the little world outside has only one use to us.

It is populated by specimens who now and then behave in a manner so novel that we can exaggerate upon this novelty and put it to our own purpose. This is all the little world outside is good for. If the *Morro Castle* breaks out in flames we, too, can have a vessel breaking out in flames. If an old woman outside somewhere sells apples we, too, can have a woman selling apples. The little world outside is only one of our many subsidiary plants being operated especially for us. We could do without it, of course. Yet now and then in a pinch it does come in handy. But what is more convenient, it is operated out there without an overhead. We do not have to pay for it continuing. The specimens out there make their own costumes and supply their own meals.

For this reason our own papers, the trade papers about ourselves, are sufficient. The other kind can be bought outside with the air of buying a curiosity, or especially if our own names are mentioned in them.

Yet I am here to learn the ways of these people, not to criticize them. I must not be another foreigner who on coming to a new country derides the customs

of the new place before waiting to see whether, for the purposes involved, these customs may be far superior to any he himself could suggest. So far I have suggested none. Therefore I should not brand as ludicrous these customs which year after year so successfully magnetize billions of dollars here when the rest of the earth, my own familiar earth, howls with poverty but can do nothing about it except continue howling.

But the self-sufficiency of this studio world with its own four or five or six trade newspapers is paralleled with a similar self-sufficiency in regard to books. There seems to be two grades of books, those which will make pictures and those which will not make pictures. The latter need not be considered except as first-edition curiosities to be filed away as show-pieces along with Ming china. The very fact that the author did not have a picture in mind when he wrote his book, labels the author as not only a fool but also places him in the class of a barefooted freak.

Yet maybe I am generalizing here, and I do not want to do that. I want neither to generalize nor ex-

aggerate. But I can tell what occurred in the commissary yesterday when a producer said to me: "What's this I hear about you having a new book out? Is there a picture in it?"

"No, there isn't."

"Oh, and I would like to have read it."

15

MANEUVERING ALONG THE studio walk ahead of me is another group of visitors accompanied by the customary studio guide. These groups, foreigners to us, obtain entrance somehow,

probably through letters from the town's largest theatre-owner back home.

But these groups are not so many now, I have been told, as their presence inside the institution is not encouraged. This group today continues wandering around the grounds ahead of me pausing to inspect us, the inmates, to see whether or not we are actors without make-up. And we who are not actors should apologize to them.

We, the inmates, may be funny. But at least we are being paid for being here. Nothing could be duller than the shooting of a scene. The visitors have been warned about this, but the warning apparently does no good. And they tell here of a lady visitor who, on seeing a shot being made on a set, said to her companion: "Ain't it disillusionin'?"

But still they continue coming into the grounds, brutes for punishment, all of them. When they see that a stage-set is hollow in back they feel perhaps that they have made a great discovery. Yet people the same as monkeys are especially made, I sometimes think, for the purpose of not leaving well enough alone.

For the Sake of Shadows

In the days when our country had trees our instinct was to cut them down. In the days when our lakes had wild ducks our instinct was to slaughter as many as possible before nightfall. And even now a little bird with a voice is something to cage.

We abhor leaving anything alone in its own surroundings where it presents itself at its best. These visitors cannot leave pictures alone when presented with all their music and trimmings in a theatre. Rather, these pictures must be hunted to their source, also, and there brought to earth as nothing other than the interior of a cold building where men sit around on rickety chairs. The building could be a warehouse.

A notice outside the studio doorway reads: "Do Not Enter When Red Light Is Burning." Such a sign appears promising to visitors. It hints of things. Yet the entire morning may be spent inside there in recording and in re-recording the closing of a door and a sigh.

The visitors undoubtedly feel they have been guided to the wrong place. This is not how pictures are made.

It could not be. "Why, how dreadfully slow these people are."

So, here is more advice, then. The temptation to think in terms of advice is irresistible. We are kibitzers standing behind a painter doing a landscape. "You are taking too long on the sky, mister. Heavens, I could have had a whole barn painted in this time."

The parallel may be exaggerated, perhaps. Yet the first thing we do on coming here, whether as visitors or as inmates, is to compare the procedure of this work with our own back home.

These visitors today no doubt expect to be baffled by intricacies. If huge wheels were whirling everywhere as in a factory, and if monster pistons were charging so fast they could not be seen, these visitors then would feel as satisfied as when they view the imponderable workings of a battleship. Few of us depart from a battleship with advice to give on how the battleship should be operated. But we feel worthy of telling a painter how to paint, or a director how to direct.

Often I have wondered why this is so, but the answer seems quite simple now. Give us something ex-

ternal to watch, such as machinery throbbing furiously, and we remain in awe. But let us be witness to something we cannot see in operation, the workings of that painter's mind, for instance, and immediately all appears easy—until we ourselves try it. Or until we ourselves try to market what we have tried.

And so the visitors remain in the warehouse cheated of the spectacular they had expected. An actor closes a door, sighs and returns to the imitation fireplace. A workman, not an actor, holds up a blackboard marked "N.G." It also is photographed. So once more, after twenty minutes of waiting, the actor closes a door, sighs and returns to the imitation fireplace. Again the workman holds up a blackboard marked "N.G." And again the actor closes a door, sighs and returns to the imitation fireplace.

"Why, good heavens, even the high school plays at home go along better than this. They at least get somewhere. They may be just boys and girls, but at least they know what they are doing." There will be much to be said when these visitors return to their

hometowns and deliver their club recitation on My Visit To The Studios.

It is this presence of visitors, then, which can incite in an inmate a loyalty to his institution. When working on a newspaper, even one which in turn had no loyalty for its own workers, we would undergo the same loyal sensation of defence should any outsider ever criticize our sheet unfairly. Only those who dedicate their lives to the creating of a pastime for others are aware that the creating of a pastime is the most exacting of work, and only they too are aware of how many lives have been forfeited to it.

We in the group may sneer at one another. It is a family matter. But the sneers of an outsider is an affront to our entirety. Outsiders are the "Them" of our lives, and to please "Them" is our duty, our religion, our philosophy, our profession, and the cause of our sleepless nights. To please "Them" is our goal, and to hate "Them" is our habit. They seem so smug, so aware of our dependence on them. If our strivings, our desperations, our efforts, our workmanship do not

result in giving "Them" a passing hour of pleasure, they can have us beheaded.

This is one reason, probably, we resent seeing visitors around the studio grounds. Their place is in the theatre where they can view the work when it is finished. But to have them here at this time is like having strangers reading over our shoulders while we are trying to write a book.

The woman who said: "Ain't it disillusionin'?" is the spokesman for all of them. It serves her right for poking her nose into the oven ahead of time before the cake is done. Also her sister is the one, probably, who constantly alludes to that great mythology, Hollywood Wild Parties. "Aren't those people a fright, the way they carry on."

No, sister, a man who spends all day on a set working, and a man or woman who spends all evening planning his or her next day's work on a set, seldom utilizes his remaining few hours of the twenty-four in an orgy. He spends it worrying—and usually about you. How you'll accept it.

After a long job is done he may, of course, take a

breather. And then is when, sister, you see his picture in the paper with supposedly nothing to do all day long, year after year, but sit on a verandah at Palm Springs looking pretty.

This is why the more one sees of curious visitors around here, the more one agrees with the attitude of one of the most notable woman leads. When visitors pry their way into the stage where she is working she plays ultra-ribald records on a phonograph between shots. The visiting women are shocked, of course, and supremely satisfied. Now they WILL have something to talk about. The actress once more has given the "Them" what it wants.

Yet, as vehement as we may become over a public which wants to take us apart to see how we work inside, the privilege in a sense is coming to the public. It is the outsiders' one rebuttal towards becoming even with artists who are ever taking the public apart, also, in writing and in play.

None of this, though, is helping my own boy and girl story. I had better get back to it. The group of visitors swim behind their guide into another ware-

house, and I turn into the entrance of the Writers Building.

In my office a new law is posted on a placard over the heater. This law, I notice, reads: Do Not Turn On This Gas Without Lighting It.

16

WE ARE AT DINNER NOW IN the Beverly Hills Brown Derby. We are trying to think up things to say which are funny. All this food is our reward de luxe for not having jumped the traces

in open rebellion against doing what our masters say the public wants us to do. If told that sequences should be cut out, we have cut them out. If told that a character would not behave as we have had him behave, we have changed the character.

So, look! As a reward we are fed well.

Each dish on the menu is the price of a day's stock of groceries in itself. I could live a day on what these oysters are costing. Yet these oysters are only the start. We have had cocktails, also. God is in his heaven.

Tonight is a Thursday night. This is servants' night off around here, and for this reason the Brown Derby is stampeded with actors, writers, directors, and with people who come here to see the actors and directors but not the writers, naturally.

Chico Marx is here and so is Zeppo. I know because they stop at our table to tell us a story. Then another. Then another. We laugh because the stories are funny. Very funny. We laugh again. We try to tell stories back in exchange. We laugh at our own stories, too. Life is sweet. It is so sweet that we are fools not to have been in Hollywood all the time.

To each booth can be connected an extension 'phone. The head-waiter will bring the 'phone and connect it to a plug by the table if there is a call for any of us.

If a call comes we joke with the one who receives it. We say: "Putting on an act, eh? Who did you hire to call you?" Then we remind one another of the supposedly true story of a woman here who, through the aid of friends, rose into the job of an important studio executive. She became so absorbed in her importance that she quite quickly forgot the friends who had aided her. But somebody advised her: "You shouldn't forget them that way. It doesn't pay. You never can tell who will be the big shot tomorrow. That's why it's always wise to keep on good terms with the office boy. For next week he may own the studio."

She meditated over this advice and finally decided to do homage to her old friends all at once with a huge dinner. They came, of course, but were amazed to find extension 'phones at her end of the table. The 'phones were of white enamel to match the tablecloth. Throughout the dinner they would ring, first one

'phone then the other, and she would interrupt the conversations to continue answering the rings.

"It's just the studio calling for my decisions," she would explain after each answer. A mighty woman was she, these guests must know. So God damned mighty was she that at the end of the meal her butler went from guest to guest with a block of ice on a silver tray, and on the ice was a rose.

Not understanding what was meant by this, the first guest did the best he could. He carefully lifted the rose, smelt it and as carefully returned it to the top of the ice. The next guest in desperation did likewise, of course. So did they all. But when the butler reached the hostess she put the rest of them in their place by touching the ice with her fingers and applying the moisture to her lips. The guests were so uncouth as not to know that finger-bowls do not always have to be finger-bowls.

So! Here in the Brown Derby we repeat this story. Laughing at the antics of others up here provides us with the greatest laughs we have. Everybody is a fool

or a rat except the immediate companions around us for the moment.

"You should really do a book on Hollywood," they advise me. "Why, the stories I could tell you about Sam Goldwyn alone would be enough. Laughs? Say, you would never get so many laughs. The time he described an actress by saying: 'She's colossal in a small way.' Laughs—say!"

Also I am advised of the tragedies. "Things that would tear your heart out happen here all the time. They are just waiting to be written and nobody writes about them."

Oh, yes, they are written. They are written so much in papers and magazines and books that now they are obvious. They are so obvious that they appear rightfully only in newspapers. Could anything be more obvious, for instance, than the time that girl leaped to her death off that monster sign HOLLYWOOD, built on a realtor's hillside here? She had come to Hollywood, had met the customary disappointment, and one night had climbed to the top of the first letter H. From its great height she plunged to

the ground. How could a writer do more with this other than repeat the news-story at the time? It was all there. It was ended. It was written.

Or how could a writer do more than repeat the news-story written in The Los Angeles *Times* a few days afterwards:

> One thousand women, of all ages, kinds and shapes, who represent the cream of Hollywood extra crop, were paraded last week in an effort to select 250 who will henceforth make up the ne plus ultra in filmdom's spear carriers. One-fourth really represented the cream. The rest were just skimmed milk.
>
> Under the glare of huge sun arcs and before the curious stares of some 300 invited guests and the discerning eyes of ten judges, the ladies twirled and minced. Some walked across the raised platform with the haughty grace of the fashion model, while others stumbled awkwardly and not a few tripped under the stress and strain of the situation. . . .

The news-story continues to tell how the selected two hundred and fifty would get the fifteen-dollar calls. What occurs to the others I do not know any more than I know what occurs at a stock market after

the horses and cows have been thumped and their mouths inspected.

"You should really do a book on Hollywood, putting in the tragedies as well as the laughs."

Oh no, mister. Thank you just the same, but it is one book which writes itself day by day in the newspapers. It would be like trying to have written a book on the war while the war was still in progress. Funny stories about the irresponsibility of doughboys were wanted then. Funny stories in which the last thing to be mentioned was blood. It must be eliminated completely. The people at home must not be reminded that blood sometimes squirts onto one's clothing during engagements with bayonets. Not until ten years afterwards could blood be mentioned really, or could sacrifices be mentioned really. A fellow needs time and distance to balance such things.

Those of us sitting here in the Brown Derby are having a great two hours. We are so liquored (just enough, you understand) and so filled with the best, that there is not a tomorrow. And even should tomorrow come we will know how to handle the problems

connected with having our boys and our girls falling in love. It is easy. Gags will come to us as they always do in the last minute. Or if they do not come we always can resort to the emergency of using the gags we already have seen. With just a little re-vamping, these gags—

So, why work at all? Why worry? Look, we are In The Money. And, since we are keeping three families besides our own, we certainly are doing our part. We are entitled to all we can get. Here, let me fill your glass again? Hell, once a guy gets a job in Hollywood all his friends' friends, all his relatives' relatives move in on him. Or live off him. You've put yourself on the spot now, old fellow. You don't dare get out. You don't dare take time off without pay to do the play you've always wanted to do. Nor write the book you've always wanted to write although knowing ahead of time it may not bring you a nickel. So, here's to a night of it, then. Here's looking at you—

No, the sacrifices of Hollywood cannot be mentioned really until ten years afterwards. The ghosts of

things undone are sure to haunt a few homes up here despite their grandeur.

This suction which drags the writing talents of the country into its vacuum and there sterilizes them, there grinds them into formula nonentities, is the same suction which is clearing the country of more than one classic which might have been written for the future but which must now for all time take its place in that Great Void of things undone "because I was too tied up to get around to it."

"Do not take Hollywood seriously," one writer may continually remind another each day. Very well, he may not take it seriously, no more seriously than he may be able to take his own death.

An outside writer coming here with an idea which had resulted in financial success elsewhere is pursued like a seagull is pursued by other seagulls until he drops it. And he, poor fool, the writer as well as the seagull, mistakes this pursuit for popularity.

Nor can this money we are receiving make the moon larger on those nights of a full moon. Nor can this money we are receiving prolong the beat of our

hearts once decadence sets in. Nor can this money we are receiving enable us to say: "By God, I've been my own man."

The Brown Derby is not so filled with people now as when we first came in. The bulldog editions of the morning papers are on sale outside the door. I can hear the boys calling them. Somebody is coming towards our table again. Hold everything. Don't rise. It will be another funny story.

17

I AM HERE IN THE FRONT Office to sign some papers. The summons came by 'phone and, unwisely, I hurried. I was in the midst of working on my story line-up when the 'phone rang.

But now that I am here I can wait until this executive or that executive or who ever was responsible for the message has time to see me.

These summonses are mindful of fire-drill a little.

We are not supposed to be able to predict when the bell will clang. But once we do drop whatever we are doing and run to our station, that is all which was expected of us. Yes, we were on the job. And after a time somebody will say: "That is all," and we may return once more to our working quarters to resume where we had left off.

One summons yesterday was for the Community Chest. I need not have combed my hair so hurriedly before answering that summons. But then I had not known what the summons was for. This is part of the drill likewise, to remain uninformed until after arriving.

Before leaving home to come here I naturally had subscribed to the Chest in my own hometown. But if a fellow should say: "But look, I gave all I possibly could afford back there," he may be given credit for the doubt but not the spirit.

The studio wanted to be represented a hundred per cent.

"What is customary for a writer to give?" I had asked.

"It's usually customary for a writer to give a day's wages. But of course you can give whatever you like."

A day's wages for a writer working here year after year constantly seemed a remarkably reasonable request, since each month some of them receive what is equivalent to the *Nobel Prize*. But for me, only on trial here, it might mean a fourth or a fifth of my total salary. And that fourth or that fifth would offset all I possibly could save, or had saved, by lugging driftwood these many years at home.

Charity is a splendid institution, no doubt, and yet it used to upset my benevolence somewhat in watching people, who were living off the County or the State or the Nation, watching me lugging driftwood up steep banks. Having nothing else to do, these people would be sitting in their cars watching me.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," I had said. "I'll give another twenty-five dollars just so we can have our hun-

dred per cent here." Already I was talking in terms of "we," then, as though taking for granted I was considered a permanent studio fixture. And for me to have offered less than twenty-five would have made my agent out a liar.

In the agent's arguments for my salary (all agents here are called Flesh-Peddlers) he had lied how I could not possibly afford to work for less because I had been making that much staying right at home. Nor had he blushed, nor had I. So, poof, what would another twenty-five dollars mean to me. Just a figure-of-speech, was all. Just a gesture of hundred per cent loyalty. I turned over the money, and the creosote for the roof at home could wait till next week.

So, maybe today's summons to the Front Office concerns another drive for something. When Sinclair had run against Merriam for governor, there had been a campaign fund raised in the studios for Merriam, I had been told. If Sinclair were elected, the studio-workers were advised, everyone would have to face such high taxes that the studios would have to be moved to Florida. "Elect Merriam and save ourselves

from having to pay a State income tax in addition to the government income tax." But with Merriam's election, the State income tax was one of the first laws passed, regardless, until now the actors and writers and directors were finding that half or more than half their salaries were going to income taxes, anyway. But this election was now long over, and sitting here waiting I can think of no new campaigns or drives. What will it be this time, though? And what will I give? And where can I get what I give?

If clothing would be acceptable, they can have whatever I have on for charity. Here are my socks. They're a luxury, anyhow, and I have another dry pair back in the desk. I don't need them, either. And here's this necktie. God knows I don't need two of them. But a woman salesman came into the office and sold it to me. She had looked through the door and said: "Oh, you're not Mr. Cobb."

I agreed with her.

Then she had walked right over, examined my tie and announced: "You shouldn't wear green. Brown's your color." She opened a box. "Try on this plaid

one. Here, let me tie it on properly. Goodness me."

Two ties, then, I can offer. If green is not acceptable, brown may be. And look, I will even tie them on the necks of whoever wants them. The black cross-strip down at the bottom is not a trademark only. The saleswoman showed me what else it is for. The other end, the one next the shirt, can go through the strip and this keeps everything compact and neat. "See how it's done. Goodness me." And a scarf is sold to match. But, sorry, I didn't buy the scarf. But next week she will be back again, she had said, and then I can offer both scarf and tie to whomsoever wants them, and they will match.

But while sitting in this Front Office waiting, one would think that this fire-drill would be ended sometime and that retreat would be sounded. But, after all, I am an employee, I must not forget. And these people are employees, also. And the people who employ them are also employees. The whole world is populated by employees with the exception of one outsider, and he's God. "And the Lord thy God is a jealous God." Could it be that He is uneasy about his

job, too? Is there someone else after it? Are these executives, by any chance, after it? Finally a buzzer rings, and a secretary nods to me: "You can go in now."

Inside is another secretary. They seem to be arranged in tiers here.

"We have a few papers for you to sign," she says. "It's just a matter of formality."

It is not another drive, then. I can keep my socks and my necktie. I can keep my day's wages.

"What are these papers about?" I ask, taking up the pen. But it makes no difference what they are about. They will have to be signed, anyway. We both are aware of this. Yet nobody likes to sign papers in absolute silence.

"Just a matter of formality," she repeats. "It's simply giving the studio all rights to whatever you do on the story you're writing. What's it on?"

"The Coast Guard."

"No, don't sign there. Sign here."

"Thank you." I sign where she indicates, then rise to go.

"No. Wait a minute. Here's another paper you're to sign, too."

Sure, bring it on. So long as it is not for something I do not possess, I may as well sign anything. Only in signing away something one does not have can there be embarrassment.

"What's this for?" I ask, again taking up the pen.

"It's just that all the work you do while under contract with us belongs to the studio. That's all. Just another matter of formality."

"I see." And I sign. There may come a time when we sign away all property rights to our own private reflections while under contract, likewise. But she offers no papers to that effect exactly, so maybe I can go now. I start to go.

She checks me. "No, just one more minute. We notice that you haven't signed the pledge yet for unemployed film-writers."

"No. This is the first time I heard of it."

"Well, it's just a case of formality, too. Here's the card. All you do is sign it and we do the rest. It'll

automatically be taken out of your pay each Saturday, and you won't have to trouble with it."

I sign, of course. And on returning to my own building I walk a roundabout way through the lot. I pass a lone tree in a small courtyard near the research building. This is the first time I had noticed the tree, and the reason I notice it now perhaps is because its branches for some reason are filled with hundreds of tiny birds. They are up there chirping down at me. They do not have to sign things.

All they have to do around here is to watch out that whatever they are sitting on is not suddenly wheeled out from under them and taken to another set. That tree, for instance, any minute may be wheeled away, and those twigs may be tied on up there. And that telephone-pole near the tree should not really be leaned against. It may be of papier-mâché.

18

AT HOME, MAIL WAS ALWAYS something to be read immediately, but here I have let a letter rest unopened on the desk since morning. The writers have a saying here that they receive

only two kinds of letters, those asking for money and those asking how to break into picture-writing. To them, generally, mail is something to be avoided. And perhaps I, too, am now growing into the same outlook.

For three hours I have been sitting here tacking pieces onto the story line-up, trying to match the colors, trying to make them fit. If by chance the pieces do match I say: "Ah, no holes in that," and then move onto the next section.

The sensation is a pleasant one when the joints of two sections are made to join. But it is not that sensation which comes with creating. Rather, the sensation is that which a child must feel on being able to make three blocks balance one on top the other.

On the envelope is printed in a corner "Newark Newspaper Guild." Newark is far away. I never have been in Newark, nor am I aware of knowing anyone living there. I open the letter, may as well now:

. . . the strike is still on and to help finance the strikers we are putting out a de luxe edition of *The Reporter*

(our own paper) which we are trying to make a collector's item.

So far, we have Walter Davenport of *Colliers*, Hugh Walpole, Jack Lait, Kit Morely, Norman Thomas, Mike Gold twinned with Mike Williams of the *Commonweal*, J. H. Wallis, Thomas Boyd, Konrad Bercovici, Don Marquis, Grant Rice, Irvin Cobb (probable), Charles Francis Coe, and Broun is working on the New York list, including Dorothy Parker, Woollcott and Ursula Parrott.

We would like to get about 200 words from you on something connected with the strike. If you get in touch with Guild members, they know all about the situation as we have been keeping them informed daily.

If you can see your way to do it, would you please shoot it airmail as I insisted that the issue be held until we could get word from you and some of the old gang on the West Coast who have been delivered from the chain gang by the movies.

Thanks

What!

I re-read the letter, taking it more slowly. It seems inconceivable that here, for once, newspapermen are campaigning to help, not the miners of Kentucky this time, nor the Government Civil Service workers this time, nor the school teachers of Chicago this time, nor the policemen nor the firemen—

Are the newspapermen actually striking (so help me if they're not) to foster the first inkling of security for themselves!

". . . until we could get word from you and some of the old gang on the West Coast who have been delivered from the chain gang by the movies."

No, this is a chain gang too. He was wrong there. But a different kind of chain gang. Our chains here are of platinum. And there are many of us, I am sure of it, who would rush right back into newspapers tomorrow if the better-to-do of these owners thought as much of us as they think of donating surplus money to aquariums, church-chimes, plaques, their own yachts, and prizes for the biggest hogs in the country.

But too many of us in our day have been assigned to write feature-stories on how Navy officers are underpaid and how Army officers are underpaid and how mayors are underpaid and how city clerks are underpaid and how legislators are underpaid—and all the time we were obtaining our material for these stories we were receiving, probably, thirty dollars a week

after being in newspaper work (and no other) for twenty years.

Yes, I know. Nor in these respects am I generalizing. I am speaking of myself, an average.

And I know also that if these studios do buy us, the same as so many newspapers buy us, we are paid for splendidly here. This is the difference between selling our liberty to a studio instead of to a paper. The studios do pay for value received, whereas on a newspaper we are given less assurance for cramped old age than the newspapers give absolute strangers for whom they are ever campaigning. And with us, the reporters, writing the campaigns!

Yet should any of us have questioned the irony of it, the subdued answer to us always has been to the effect: "Yes, but you love the game, don't you?"

We plead guilty. Yes, we love the game. We love it so God damnably much that we avoid having children if possible. They are too expensive. For our own sakes we should all have been sterilized when cub reporters. And for our own sakes we should walk into a lethal chamber in celebration of our fiftieth birthday.

This is for our own good, because once after reaching that age we are an open target for the first efficiency expert hired to inspect the office.

For an old newspaperman to be pensioned by his firm is not an absolute rarity. We all admit it now and then does occur. But the few dollars are given out of sympathy, not out of duty. "Poor old dog. All his teeth are gone. He can't keep up with the other dogs any longer. I really should shoot him. But—well, you know how it is. He's been here thirty years."

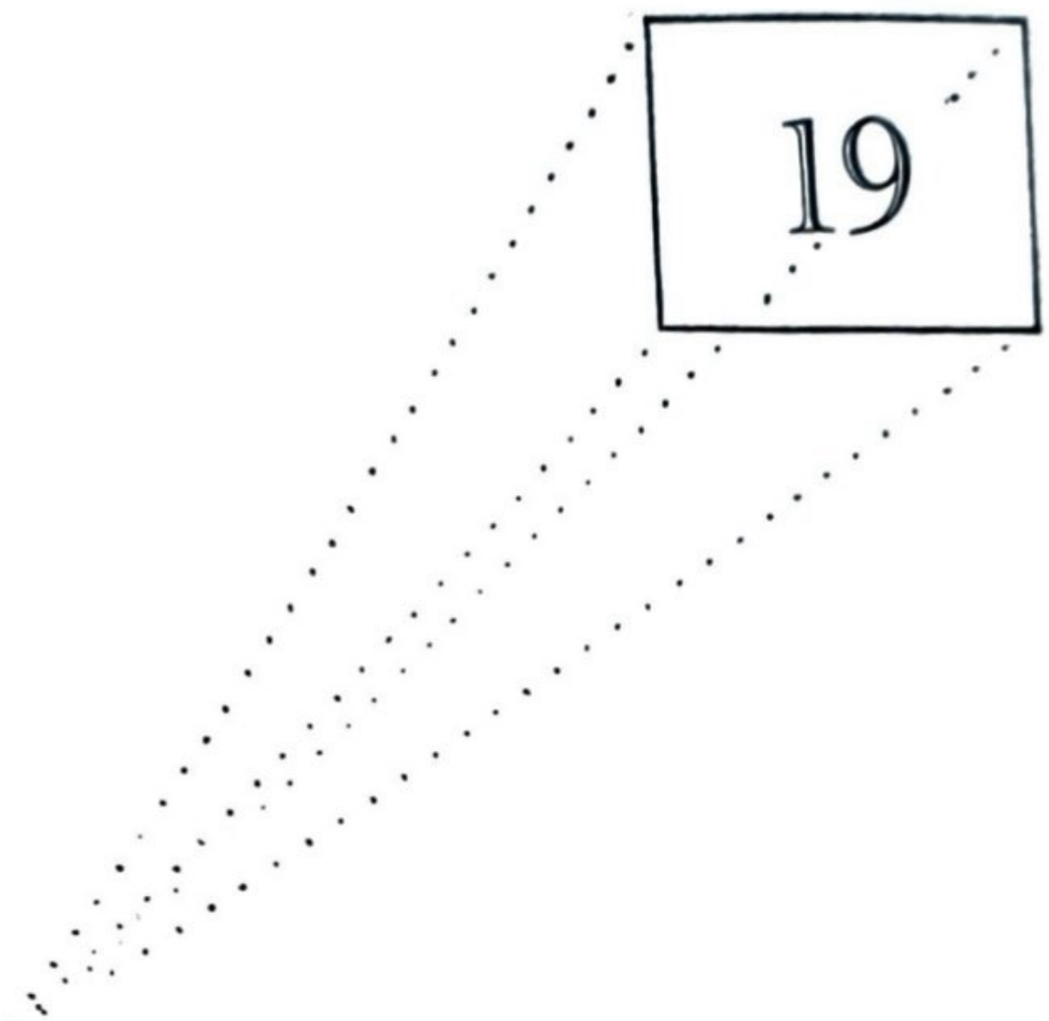
And during those thirty years he has been assigned to write stories that workers elsewhere be pensioned, and he has written human-interest features that workers elsewhere be pensioned. And he has done such stories only too often after the conclusion of covering his own beat for the day. The additional assignment would be handed him just as he was starting to think he could go home now at the conclusion of thirteen or fourteen hours of competitive labor.

So, certainly I shall write those paragraphs for that especial paper in Newark. But if the paragraphs constitute more than two hundred words, the editor there

must not blame me. He simply can cut out what he does not want. It is the least I can do. He is most generous to give me the opportunity.

And look! I shall write them now during my noon hour. A member of one chain gang (temporarily up in the world a little with an office of his own) nodding condescendingly to his old acquaintances in the other.

A whore in a Riverside Drive apartment waving ever so slightly to her former roommate, Dottie, down on the street.



19

ON SEEING A PICTURE WHICH varies just the slightest from the customary structure I now can be assured that somebody in the studio risked his reputation, his livelihood, his future income, on the gamble.

Before coming here I did not understand just how much of a man's life was at stake in an experiment. I had presumed that the reason so many pictures were alike was because the people who wrote them lacked originality.

But this is not what they lack. What they lack, first of all, are the lungs of a jury-lawyer. To design a picture structure which is different is easy. But what is not easy is the oral vocabulary essential for convincing a studio to risk a half-million dollars on some underling's daring dream.

Now and then we do see pictures which vary in set-up from previous pictures. That is true. *Berkeley Square*, for instance. *Outward Bound*, for instance. There are some others, of course. But had these been originally written in a studio and presented to an executive for consideration the stories would have been returned to the writer's desk promptly.

Safety is the watchword here. If fools do insist on trying to attempt something extraordinary, let them attempt it on their own time. Let them attempt it on the legitimate stage first. Let them attempt it in a

novel. Or let them attempt it in a classic which has outlived the author and the century. Yet even after this test on the public, the studio to safeguard its financial security will have the piece juggled as closely as possible back to the good old steady structure which for so many years now has paid the overhead on studio wives and a summer home in Malibu.

Any venture is nonsense until proved a money-maker elsewhere, either in book or play. And if in a book, the venture is still nonsense. "But our own studio writers can straighten that out. All we want is the title."

I remember with what astonishment I listened to the writers here telling of a new play which a studio had purchased from the New York stage. What astonished me was the information that the writer had written the play while on the lot and had submitted the plot to the executives for consideration as a film. The story not only was turned down but the writer, his contract now ended, was released quickly.

He sold the play in New York. It was successful,

and the same studio turned around, bid for it, and obtained the rights for sixty thousand dollars.

But the executive who purchased the play had an explanation ready. He said: "Why, my good man, that's business. The writer put in extra work on the play, no doubt. And aside from that, whose risk was it—his or ours?"

As I say, I was astonished. But to be astonished at such stories is the sure sign of a novice up here. For similar deals, I know now, occur many times throughout the year.

So, it is not up to me to question the place. It is only up to me to try to catch on. These people know more about business than I ever will know. Also they are a millionfold more familiar with money.

They are so familiar with money that art is something not to be tampered with until someone else, working alone out of Hollywood, proves his findings are sure. We, the outside writers of books or the outside writers of plays, are nothing more to these people than desert rats scouring the foodless hills in search of a vein. If, after years of living on bacon, we do strike

a vein—ah, then is time enough for them to come in with their money and pay several thousand for the full rights to a million dollar claim. But the searching, the great chances, the desperation—these have all belonged to us. And for us to call them fools for offering so much money is as silly as for a half-starved prospector to shake his head in hopelessness at the ways of a city man who has just signed the big check for the mine's ownership.

But the film-writers who always have written for Hollywood and never for themselves are really the backbone of each studio's writing establishment. Knowing the formula by heart they are referred to as the "doctors," being capable of jockeying any classic quickly into the established picture-form. They have been doing this so long that it is only natural that in time they should assume an attitude of benevolence almost towards the writers of the original books. Poor old authors, they do so lack any sense of construction.

Yet for these inherent film-writers, these "doctors," one feels no sense of pity. If they were not working in Hollywood, God knows where they would be

working, but it is likely that wherever they were they would not be working under the classification of writers.

But one does feel pity of a sort for the young film-writers of twenty-eight or thirty who were snatched from outside creating before really being given a chance. And now, on receiving their thousand or two thousand weekly they have no recourse for knowing how much this money in costing them.

Walking directly from school through some fluke into this kingly ransom they are completely devoid of having experienced lonely hours of thought and of honesty with oneself and naturally show a supercilious expression of superiority when such non-paying trivialities are mentioned.

But, after all, these youngsters are the best recruits for film-writing. Being unacquainted with spiritual honesty (except as a gag for heroes) and being unacquainted with independence (except in such terms as refusing to work for less than some amount) these young fellows fit well into the scheme of He and She stories for films the same as they would fit well into

the scheme of He and She stories for magazines. It is all the same.

The He and She story-writer for magazines can also work quite conveniently, even contentedly, here. Or for that matter any writer can work conveniently here to whom the size of the check remains paramount in all their outputs.

Yet had some of these young film-writers not been snatched so soon into the splendor of having a chauffeur and a valet, it is likely that one or two of them at least may have produced in his lifetime something of endurance in the country's literature. But the comeback trail against such a handicap is a difficult one, in fact almost an impossible one. It is a far more deadly handicap than if they had started poor and had remained that way. These youngsters already are lost.

For a true artist, whether a writer or a painter, would prefer an audience to financial security. Give him an audience for his work, and poverty is no hardship whatsoever. He can live on stolen carrots happily. But deprive him both of meals and of an audience, and then if he can carry on regardless he is of

the stuff from which Rembrandt was made—Rembrandt who lingered his last days in a Poor House literally.

But we who have been looking at Hollywood from the outside so long and who have wondered why originality is so lacking here, stop wondering the day after we arrive. It is not lacking among all the writers here. It cannot be, because some of these writers are the identical ones who were so original on the stage in New York and who were so original in their books elsewhere. A four-day train ride could hardly have knocked it all out of them.

Yet why they were hired to come is something which as yet I do not understand. Although maybe this, too, will be cleared up by tomorrow. But it seems to me they were more valuable to a studio where they were.

Grand Hotel, for example, certainly could not have been conceived and risked by a studio without first seeing the outside proof of its commercial value. And yet Vicki Baum is now in this same building. At least

I see her name daily on the board of names outside the entrance to this Writers Building.

Until *Grand Hotel* came along, the standard of all stories seemed to have been *Seventh Heaven.*

"I want this story sort of on the *Seventh Heaven* idea, you understand." This was told to writers and still is being told to writers.

But now added to it is: "I want this story sort of on the *Grand Hotel* idea, you understand."

Outward Bound and *Berkeley Square*, though revolutionary also, are neglected as examples to writers because, from what I am told, they were not especially good box-office. Especially is this said to be true of *Berkeley Square.* Too sophisticated. So, it is better for producers just to forget about them as "ideas" when addressing new writers.

Yes, and there is one other, *Anna Christie.* But it also is wiser to avoid as an example because all stories cannot have Garbo.

A writer really should know all this before he comes. It might save him embarrassment. It might

save him from suggesting to a producer: "Listen, I've a new idea I'd like to try out."

"That's fine. We're always looking for new ideas. What is it?"

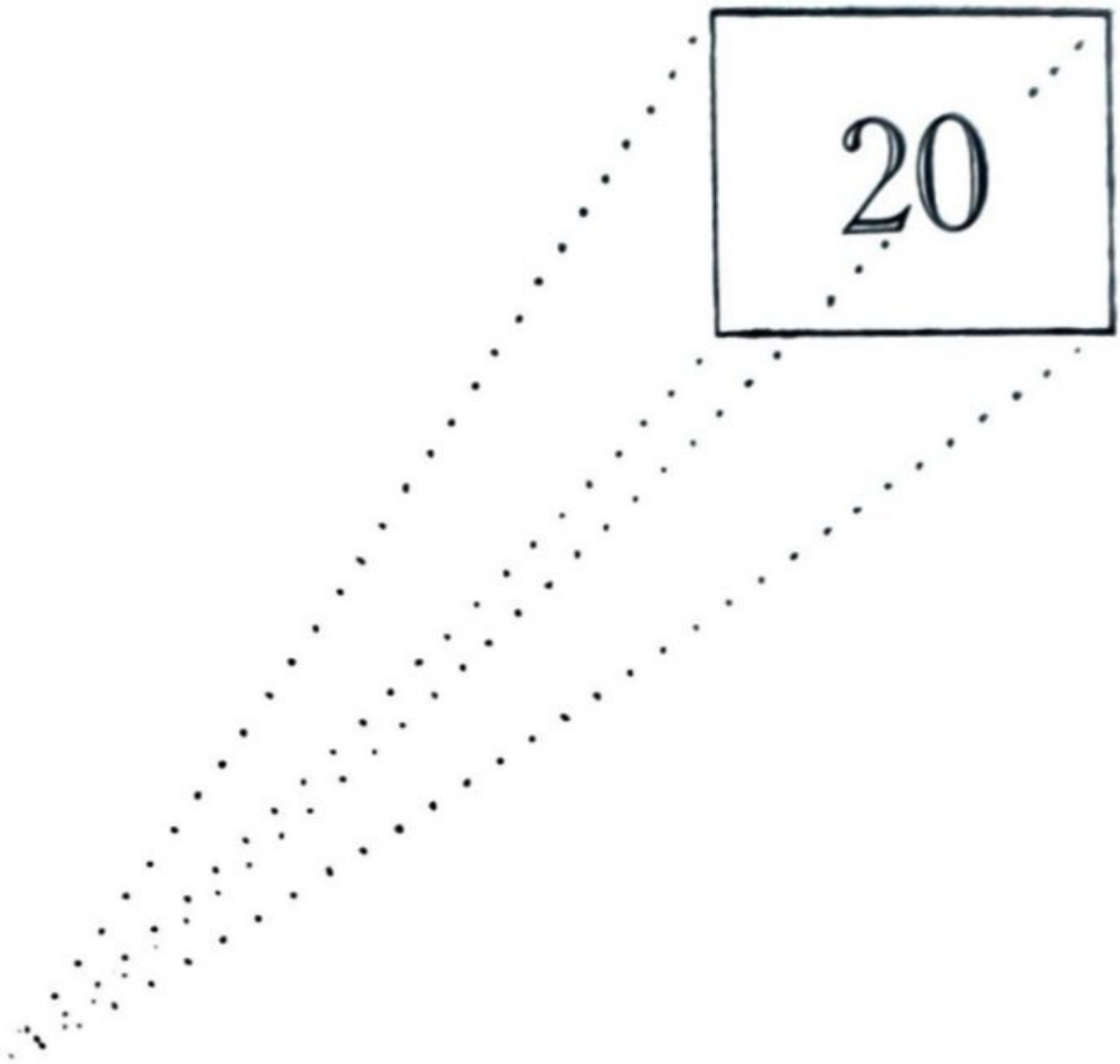
The writer can then tell the idea or even write it out.

"Yes, it's a new idea, all right," the producer may admit. "But how do you know it will work? Has it ever been tried out?"

"No."

"Well, so there you are."

And to that, of course, there is no answer.



OFTEN DURING THE PAST ON seeing an old sailing vessel which has been deliberately drawn up on a mud bank for the last grotesque sleep I have wondered why a film could not someday be

made showing the transitory period between sail and steam.

"But why don't you write it for a film, then?" I have said to myself. "That's the only thing to do. Write it and send it to your Hollywood agent to try to sell."

Yet always again the studios' requirement of love between a boy and a girl has stopped me. For, this story would have only one love, and it would be between the old skipper and his useless vessel. They have been together more than a quarter of a century.

And I can visualize the scene where he, on returning from a long cruise, is searching the docks for another cargo. His old friends in the shipping offices say they have no cargo. Yet even while they are talking the old man, looking through the office windows, can see the winches hoisting slings of cargo into the holds of freighters.

More years pass, but he resists all temptations to have his schooner mutilated into a barge. Rather than have those masts taken down he would rather have his own legs cut off.

Then, through trickery of some sort, perhaps through his wife or his grown sons, the old schooner is sold for its present value of a few hundred dollars. It is towed outside the harbor to be anchored either as a houseboat or a gambling ship or for a fishing barge. The old man, bewildered by what is taking place, goes along with the vessel.

He knows by now that he no longer is the owner, and that the schooner is to be remodelled, including the cutting down of the masts. This treachery to his old friend is too much for him. And that night, alone on the vessel, he works many hours hoisting the ancient sails as best he can with the aid of the capstans. He points the bow seaward, gets rid of the anchor, goes down into the hull and cuts out a plank or two, then shuts himself up in his cabin. His ancient skipper's cap is there. He puts it on. He pours himself some cognac and drinks to his old crew and to the grandness of the schooner herself.

In the morning when a shoreboat-load of carpenters arrives at the former anchorage, the schooner barely

can be seen far, far to seaward with its sails already awash.

Yes, I would like to see such a love story filmed about an old man. But obviously it would not be enough. It would have to be the secondary love story in the picture. And the real love story would still have to predominate about a boy and a girl.

Yet, sitting here in this office and with the 'phone for the moment quiet, I cannot resist the impulse of trying to smuggle this antique skipper and his antique schooner into this Coast Guard line-up somehow. I wonder how it could be done, for already I can hear the learned arguments against it. And against arguments I am hopeless. I do not know how to meet them. For up here a writer must be more skilled in defending a point orally than in creating it originally.

Each line which is presented on paper is the signal for an open forum. A writer remains guilty for what he has written unless through the aid of oratory he can prove himself innocent. He is confronted with oratorical veterans who know all the oratorical answers.

It is called Punching Holes In A Story. It is not called Building A Story.

"Well, we sure punched holes in that new fellow's yarn, didn't we? I should say so." No, my antique man and his antique schooner must not be presented to the surgeons. Or if he is, he must be made so fool-proof that their surgical knives will be chipped on him. How then could he be made fool-proof, I wonder?

He could be father of the boy. He could be father of the girl. No, not of her, because she has money. But he could be father of the girl who the boy was supposed to marry and who the audience doesn't want him to marry. The audience could see her selling the schooner out from under her own old man, so the audience doesn't want the boy to marry her.

This might do. But no, how can it? I am on an entirely different story now. I am juggling with the ridiculous. I am thinking like they talk in story-conference. I am not on the simple clean-cut story of an old man in love with his schooner. I would have no way whatsoever of showing the transitory period between sail and steam, or of showing that scene where

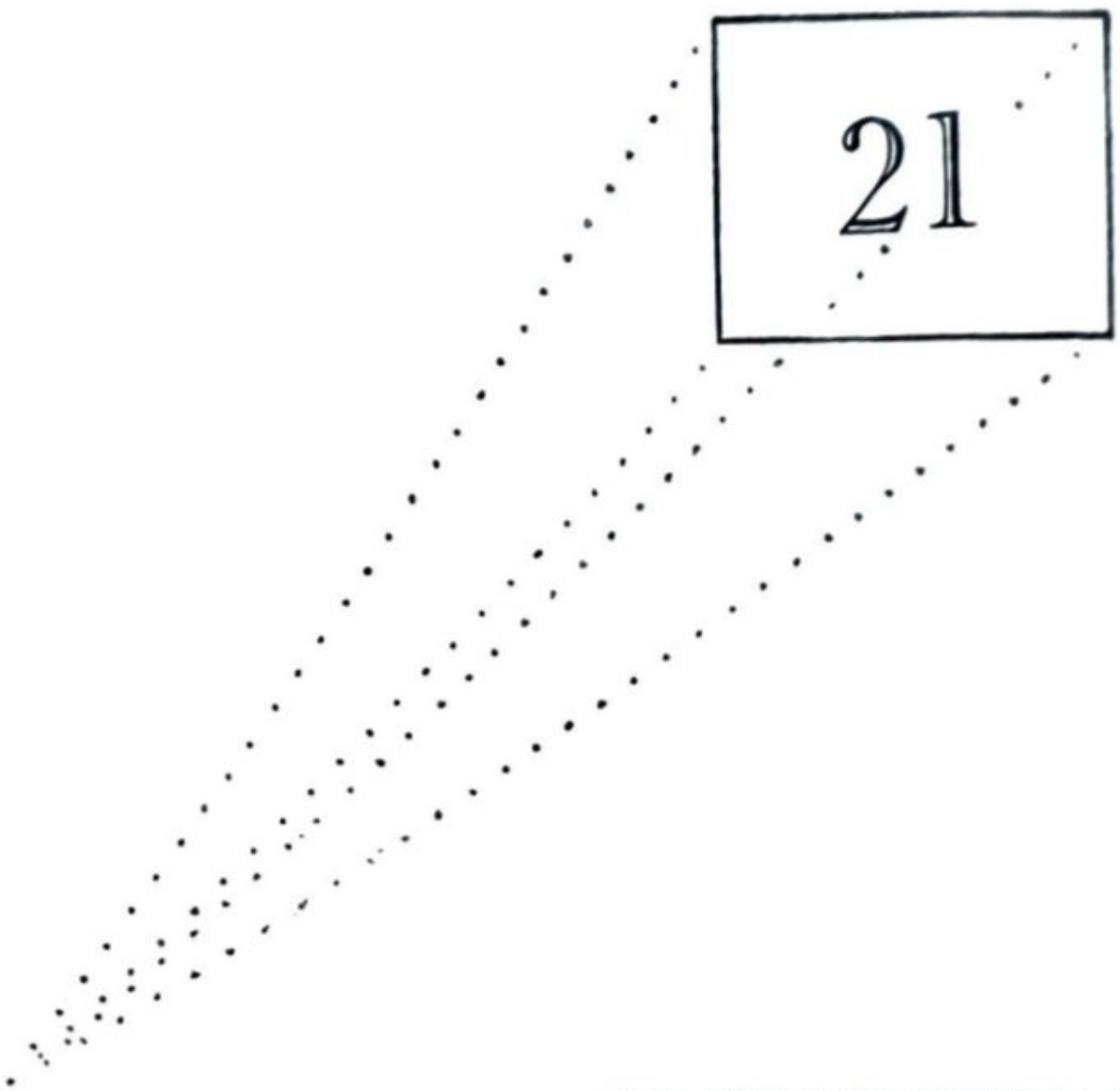
the old man is searching the shipping offices for freight and is being told there is none.

And without this build-up scene the rest would appear maudlin. It would not work. Better just forget about it. The love between boy and girl is enough love to handle in one picture. God knows it is. It is as much, anyway, as I can handle when the oral debates begin.

"He's in love with her, see. And she doesn't know whether or not she's in love with him, see."

Will I, too, soon be talking out loud like this?

Yes, mister. Any hour now you may be summoned to begin talking out loud just like this.



worker hears up here, I think, is that one poor picture may be forgiven, but that two poor box-office pictures in succession is a signal to watch out and that

three consecutive poor pictures is good bye forever.

Actors say it. Producers say it. Directors say it. And each is so dependent on the other in a production that any of the three who shows the least indication of slipping is to be avoided if at all possible.

Nobody wants to be aboard a leaking vessel. It may be gallant in all respects except for a leaky seam. But rather than try to repair the leak it is much more simple to leave the vessel, to abandon it, and to fly to the colors of another vessel brand-new.

This in part accounts for the derelicts we see up here everywhere. They belong to a ghost-like navy of their own, and their invisible insignia reads: "Three Pictures In Succession Didn't Draw Box-Office. Cheerio."

The more one sees of this huge armada of ill-luck the more amazed does one become at the navigation of the four or five (but scarcely more) Big Names which have remained afloat more than fifteen years while all about them other spars were toppling into the sea. For them to have remained afloat required more than acting-genius. Because acting-genius is not

enough. It is nowhere near enough. It is, in fact, hardly even the first requirement.

The first requirement, perhaps, is nimbleness, the ability to leap from one deck to another deck a little more quickly than the other person. Loyalty to one's friends may be a virtue, but among a fleet of sinking vessels it is not a business virtue. It is better to limit friendship to such things as Christmas cards. And even then and even there, one should be cautious.

Not a week passes without a local paper running an interview with some actor who not so many years ago was the personification of security. All these interviews read the same. They could be carbon copies with only the names transposed. So common are these interviews with one-time stars that an outsider could suspicion that each newspaper must maintain a department especially for the purpose. Each newspaper could have a man who calls himself: Editor of Lost Faces. It could be a Lost and Found Department of its own, except that the Found does not mean very much. It means only that the actor will see his or her face in print once more.

I sit here looking at today's Los Angeles *Times*, for instance, and the actress this morning is Alice Lake. Tomorrow it will be another. To try to elaborate on such stories is senseless. The reporters, as is so usual up here, tell all there is to tell:

"Alice Lake was 'tops' when Valentino, Viola Dana and Nazimova were her contemporary stars. Now she grins a bit more cheerfully when she can get two days a week at a studio as an extra.

"She is one of that little band of former stars who today are glad for extra 'atmosphere.' The little group that once commanded better than $1000 a week in Hollywood, each one of them—but who now just thank a casting director for the smallest bit, or the extra work.

"Alice Lake is perhaps the most cheerful of them all. She has evolved a philosophy which is stronger than the tugging of actual want.

"Yesterday she expressed amazement when an interviewer spoke of Hollywood as being hard, heartless, forgetful.

" 'Why, we can't stay on top forever! When I came

to Hollywood Mabel Normand had to move over and make room for me; it's a matter of displacement, you see. I had to get out of the way for some one newer. I don't envy the new ones, either. All I ask is a little bit of work now and then.'

"She tossed her dark head and laughed as though the cigarette she was taking from the ash tray were a fresh one. She had started smoking that cigarette the night before, had thoughtfully quenched its fire, so that it could be smoked again.

" 'You'll pardon me for doing this, I hope?' she laughed. 'One must economize, you know. . . .'

"The room was awfully small but neat.

" 'I'm moving, you know . . . tomorrow. I'm going to live closer to the Boulevard and Vine . . . I like the 10 cent stores there . . . and the crowds. After one has given all of one's efforts, dreams, strength, to an industry of any sort—even the films—one gets the feeling that one doesn't belong in any other place.

" 'I don't want New York, Paris, China. I want only to stay right here in Hollywood, where I used to be tops, and do the best I can, whenever they give me

the chance to work. Around the holiday time it's always hard, for some reason . . . when one needs the money most.

" 'Of course, I'm one of that crowd—that crowd I meet every once in a while on some set—former stars!

" 'Some of them are discouraged, of course, but why get discouraged? There is only one little complaint that I can make.

" 'I wish the directors would forget about our names —would forget that we once were important people, and just give us the extra work. They don't have to give us parts; all we want is the work.' "

On reading such stories before coming here they remained just that—stories. Freak happenings occur everywhere with man-bite-dog regularity, and this would have been just one more of them. But here, on visiting a set or on looking around inside the commissary, it is surprising such stories are printed at all. They are not news any more than the discovery of one more body in a battlefield strewn with thirty thousand odd bodies is news.

Nor before did I have any sympathy whatsoever

on reading about actors who once received a thousand-a-week and who were now desperate. They should have saved, I thought. It was their own fault.

But this was before observing how each top actor who does not spend, who does not donate fabulously to each new charity as fast as these charities are originated, who does not support rafts of relatives, is flatly indexed as a "Hollywood Rat." The title certainly is not beneficial to his work. In addition he has the two income taxes to meet, the State Income Tax and the Government Income Tax, leaving a top actor perhaps about twenty-five cents out of each dollar he earns.

So, if he does not give and give and buy and buy and support and support and pay and pay he is a rat. And if he does give or buy or support he is called afterwards "a guy who was a sucker." A new word may be coined for this old one someday, but the old fashioned one is the one still used here.

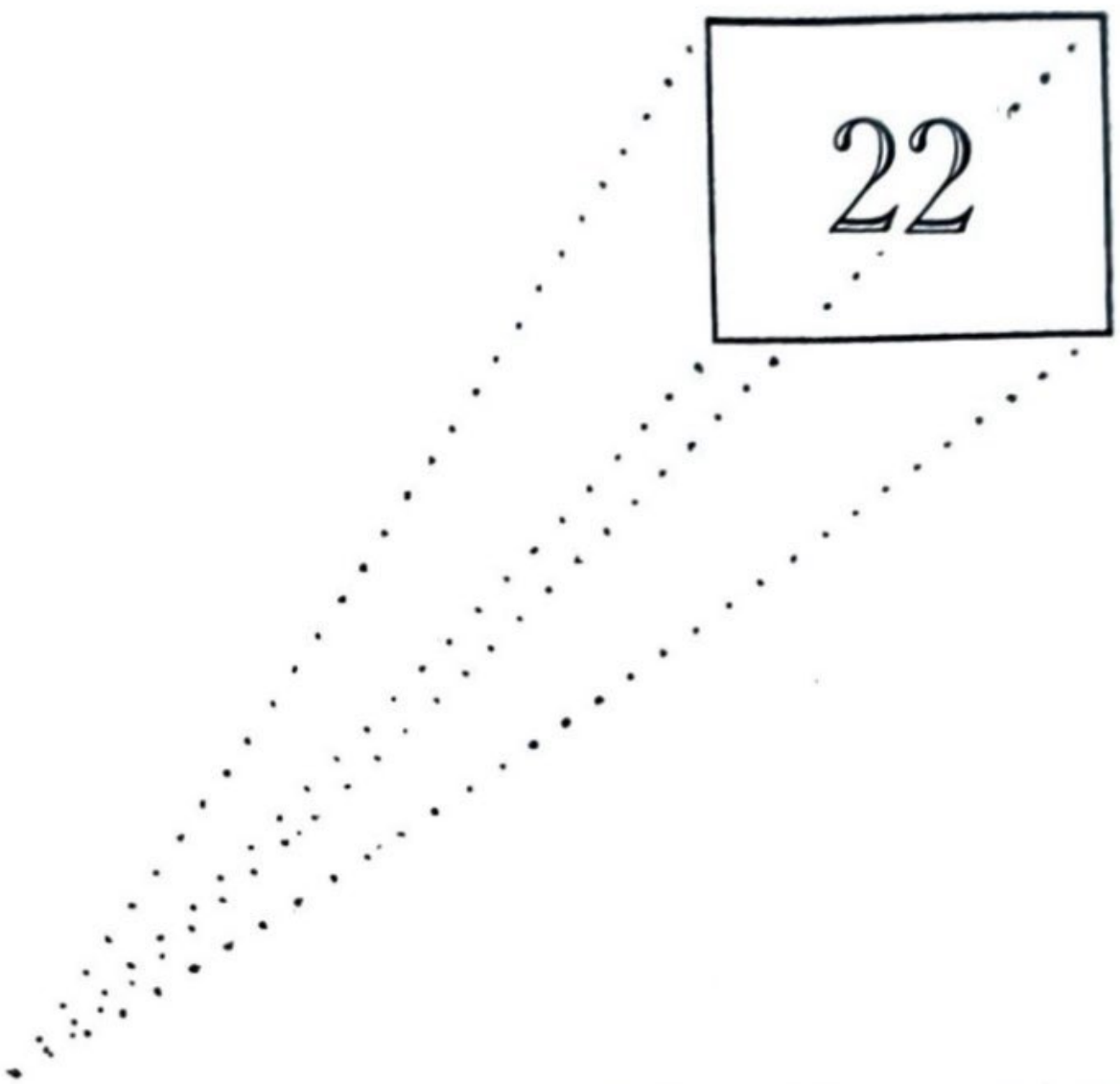
"No, don't get her for the part. She's no longer box-office. Her last picture didn't bring in a dime."

This soon fades to: "She'd be all right for the part, I admit. But what's she done this past year? Nothing.

She hasn't worked once. We can't afford to take a chance on anybody who hasn't worked for a year, can we? I'll say we can't. Not in my picture, anyway."

And so this soon fades, finally, to a reporter recording: "She tossed her dark head and laughed as though the cigarette she was taking from the ash tray were a fresh one."

Already in less than a week I have seen the actuality in progress. I have overheard such conversations which, when pieced together, comprise the entirety. No research is necessary. Nothing is necessary, beyond a table in the commissary at noon-time.



SITTING HERE WITHIN THESE gates-within-gates I can quite forget that sod is left on the earth. Or that sweat is left. Or that the sea itself is left. All these belong to a remote era, as remote as the

Cretaceous Period. A hazy memory of them comes to me, but the memory is that of a man who has been reincarnated.

I am far away from the sod and the sand now. The ocean has dried up completely long ago. Men no longer walk around or work with their backs. Now they sit in offices and argue about how these people-who-once-lived must have behaved in their living. To go out and see for ourselves, or to be one of them ourselves, is impossible. We cannot so easily slide back into the genuineness of living creatures again.

And yet distant as we seem to be from all this, not more than two hours' flight from this enclosure are condors with wing-spreads of nine and eleven feet. They live in the hills way back there where few men have the energy to go. And in the spring whales still glide in schools near the kelp-bed back home, and off the Mexican coast a few miles to the south fishermen still sight sharks as long as their own fishing crafts.

But I would not believe this, sitting here. I could not believe it. All I can believe now is that life has been graduated so far from all actuality that nothing

is left for us to do but to think up smartness and plots, and to try to imagine, if we can, what life was like when we had it. For now we dwell in arguments only. And our battles, when we have them, are not to subdue animal competitors who would eat us, but to subdue with words if possible the visitor from the next room. Or to emerge victorious from a conference.

I would, if I could, like to walk along a lonely shore-line this hour for assurance that the tide still comes in and that the tide still recedes and that the ocean remains as uncontrollable as ever it did. I need this assurance. Without it I may become as completely lost as though I really were a man of a million years ago re-planted without warning onto an earth where soil no longer exists. Or where our contemporaries of the sea and of the swamps no longer would rather eat us than listen to us. For acknowledgment of this I would have to glance once more at a crocodile or an octopus to see if they were the same as in my former day or were replicas in rubber. Or if they were figures-of-speech mechanically preserved from the

past simply to serve us now as stuffing when plots become dull.

In this enclosure I am so secure from reality that already I, too, am beginning to think that sea captains are a type and that one captain is the same as another, and that the poor are a type and that one poor man is the same as another, and that virgins are a type, and that even reporters are a type, also.

I, too, will soon be saying perhaps: "We'll have a fellow in this picture who's the reporter type." Although such a classification is something which in the depth of my heart I know is impossible, still within a few days I will allow myself to be convinced that it not only is possible but also absolute. Those who are over me will show me the error of presuming that no reporter covers an assignment unless bilged.

And I will answer: "Okey, then, you're probably right. We'll keep him bilged to the eyeballs." For the newspapermen who have gone before me here have likewise been persuaded to say: "Okey, then, you're probably right. We'll keep him bilged." It is the easiest

way out, the only way out, when one's job here depends on final submission.

The reason I am thinking of reporters this moment especially is that I have just returned from being called into a story-conference concerning a reporter in a small city. The reporter in the script had just obtained an exclusive story and was rewarded by having his pay raised from sixty dollars a week to a hundred.

Though this was not the point for which I had been called in for questioning, it was the point which struck me as desperately in need of repairing.

"In the first place," I explained, "he wouldn't be receiving sixty a week. Not now-days on a small paper for the beat he was covering. And in the second place, editors don't give bonuses like that."

"What do they give?"

"Well, if they're exceptionally decent they'll let his expense-account ride, perhaps, if he keeps it down to a few dollars."

"Listen, you're crazy as hell. I worked on a paper once. I worked on one six months in New York."

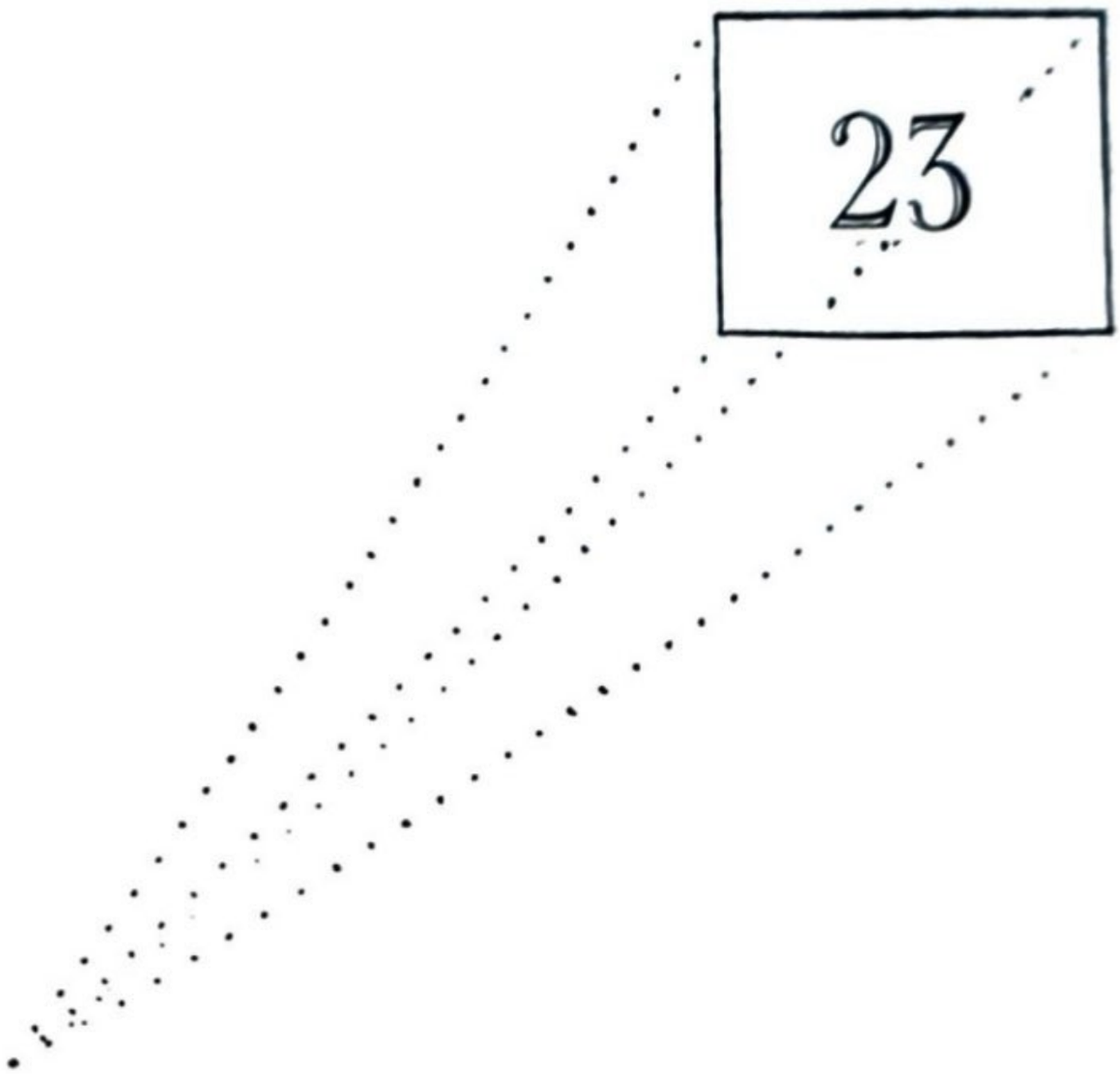
"But this story isn't supposed to be in New York."

"Nuts! The picture'll show in New York, won't it!"

"Okey, okey," I said quickly. "Then we'll just skip it."

Yet within another week, as I say, I will be believing him, as his voice is higher pitched than mine. He will be telling me that the Coast Guard Service hates the Navy, and will be expecting me to believe that, likewise.

In fact, one man already has suggested that I use such an angle for the plot.



OFTEN IN TRYING TO FATH-
om the cause of the discontentment among outside writers now working here for good I sometimes believe one of the reasons is that this is the end, the sum-

mit of the money-road, and from here there is nowhere else to go so long as they are the type to whom money is the criterion. Financially, nothing is left for which to struggle.

Screen-credit may pile on screen-credit, and weekly check may follow weekly check, and their names may spread in the trade, but their names will not spread beyond the trade. So quickly are the screen-credit names switched on and off at the beginning of a picture that the screen-writers could remain in Hollywood twenty more years without being recognized anywhere else but here.

Their checks also must pay, then, for the damages received by their ego. To be praised once or twice by a lone man, an executive, is not sufficient. And the checks, for all their outlandish size, undoubtedly do not always appear large enough to offset the awareness of personal frustration.

These film-writers in their secret hearts cannot help but feel at times that if only they had had the opportunity they could have done something great. A thought which one is not allowed to express in writing

remains an immense thing. It is only after the thought is written that it takes its place among other quite ordinary thoughts, being neither revolutionary nor astounding. There are so many thousands of years of recorded observations to be overtaken first before one himself can present something seemingly new.

So, the difference between an outside writer of honest books who writes himself out as he goes along and these bridled film-writers here is that the outside writer at least has the satisfaction of seeing for himself that what he had hoped would be great had turned out, after all, to be only extraordinary at most. Yet still he had the satisfaction of knowing that greatness was not in it. Yet in his mind there is always a next time, and again he drains himself to the utmost. But what holds him back from greatness are not studio laws, are not overseers, are not studio rules about lighting the gas in these office heaters after turning the gas on. What holds him back (and in time he comes to admit it) are his own limitations. He has only his own limitations to overcome, then, and not the limitations of his overseers.

When some of these studio-writers were reporters on newspapers and earning less than a tenth on a twentieth of what they now are receiving, they at least had the satisfaction, too, of knowing there was only one direction to move, and it was up. Also they had the satisfaction of steeping themselves more and more with a close view of humanity as represented by jails, politicians, professional athletes, heroes, death, wrecks and the cranks who come up to see the editor.

But here in the studios, the writers are supposed to know already all there is to know about humanity. It is the only tool-kit of supplies required of them on coming. It must last them all the time they are here, and they must draw and re-draw on it, with all the useable material going out and nothing coming in. For new contacts here are rare other than the studio contacts of one's own kind.

This is why, too, I sometimes think that they begin to believe in the stuff of which pictures are made.

Having utilized all their own original material, or having been persuaded not to use it, they must through necessity study each other's pictures too

faithfully, instead of studying man directly. They do this so much that a natural man on the outside would appear a peculiar man to those on the studio's inside.

Or even if they do realize this, the realization makes no difference against the argument: "Yes, but it's what the public wants."

This statement, incidentally, is the finale to any dispute. "Yes, but it's what the public wants," is a statement which will stand up against anything in a story-conference. There is no answer yet found for it.

For, should another studio, by taking a long chance, produce a picture directly opposite from what "the public wants," and should that picture make box-office, it instantly becomes "what the public wants." In this manner the game goes on. In this manner the others immediately fall in line. In this manner we all know exactly what the public wants until the public next month proves what liars we are.

We explain it by saying among ourselves that the public is "fickle." But I do not think it is that fickle. I merely think it can become damnably sick at times of being saturated with "what the public wants."

The whole thing is mindful a little of those obnoxious writers who instead of striking out for themselves in writing a book study the weekly Best Seller lists to take guidance from them. Such a writer is no whit superior in outlook than these studio executives with their box-office charts, although he may classify himself as a true artist really, a free soul. He is the type, too, who on seeing others selling when he is not selling can become as indignant and as jealous as the more villainous characters in his own book.

We who are in Best Seller lists do not mind them. But we who are not in such lists see in them all the ugliness of racketeering, free advertising, and a great unfairness. We see how a book has to be placed there just once either through a misunderstanding or a fluke and the monkey-readers go for it the same as they would for anything else imitatively. This is when we say: "Literature is the one thing which should not be handled like whippet races." Nor can any actor's or producer's vehemence approach a writer's own vehemence at such a display of unfairness. Yet an actor's arguments over his own non box-office reports is the

same as a writer's both in language and logic. For, in begging for an audience both an actor and a writer are brothers.

Yet true writers of the outside learn only too soon that imitation means death. But in a studio imitation, for some reason, is supposed to guarantee security. So, here in the films we continue spying on one another's output and continue copying one another's output so much that instead of looking on man himself we become nothing more, really, than an inbred family living in isolation and our offspring have the inbred offspring's look. It has the eyes of our cousin, the nose of our sister, and the mannerisms of the grandpapa film which went before.

Films for a fact can interbreed so quickly this way that only with the coming of a stranger to the farm can there be any new blood at all. But then, of course, the stranger's blood is soon swallowed up in interbreeding, also. No, it does not last long, either. But it does leave its marks to be imitated forever more.

The writers here realize all this. It is not news to them. But to realize the conditions of a system is not

the same as being able to change the conditions of a system. For of all the many professions required in Hollywood for the production of a single picture, the profession of the writer stands in importance only midway between the Front Office and the boy who delivers the mail. The writer is below the actors, the producers and the directors. So, when it comes to a final show-down argument, the writer's voice is a ridiculously small one. It may be loud and it may be desperately earnest, but in the end it will still be very small.

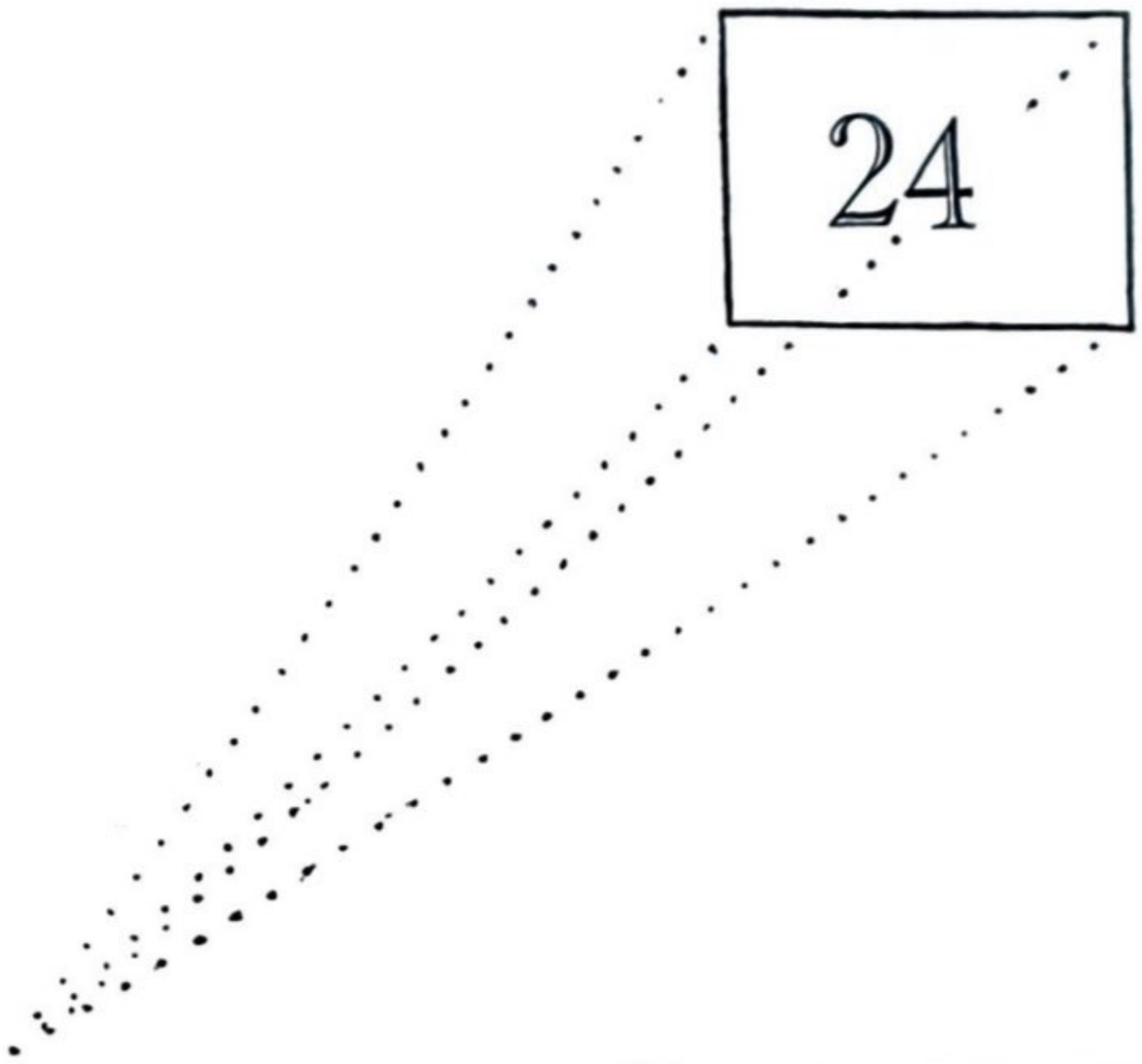
This sensation of being a nonentity may not be so trying on film-writers who have been film-writers always, and nothing else. But the sensation cannot so easily be digested by those writers whose printed opinions and whose novels were, not so long ago, influencing the country's thinking. Now, suddenly, they find themselves being dictated to by some little fellow in the studio who can comprehend characterizations only after seeing similar characters already on the screen, or who would not be able to land a job in the studio at all if his uncle did not own most of the company.

Such a set-up naturally produces bitter gall within a one-time important writer. The weekly check alone can compensate for this bitterness, and the check itself is soon spent.

But what is more, the picture as dictated by the little fool, damn it, has a fifty-fifty gamble of making box-office. And money, of course, is the final proof of anything. It is the final answer. The writer's idea, had it been given a chance, may have made more money and may have pleased more people. But, quien sabe? It did not. So there!

Yet again, in the writer's mind is always the question that maybe the "little fool," after all, was right. Hence begins the first germs of that lonely feeling of inferiority in a formerly independent mind. The germs find their first home when a writer abandons any great defence of himself and his judgment against those over him. To fight for an idea becomes non-worth-while. The fight does not increase one's pay. All the fight does is to increase one's blood pressure. He finds that it is easier, in the long run, simply to go

along trying to please the gentlemen who pay him. And these gentlemen over him, he cannot forget, are many and many. Their suites are in the Front Office, and in the evening the chauffeurs call for them.



HERE AS ON A NEWSPAPER the predominating theme calls for action so consistently that occasionally I wonder if movement is the only entertainment comprehensible to mankind.

Yet, five minutes of absolute inaction everywhere, of absolute motionlessness, would frighten us more than an earthquake. If we could imagine five minutes during which nothing whatsoever could move, neither branch nor cloud nor animal nor bird nor our own bodies, we would be more startled than if in the midst of a hurricane.

There is no word describing the terror which would strike us. The adventure of non-motion would be the epitome of all adventures ever experienced by man or by the living objects on earth before the time of man. Nor would there be any method of establishing the duration of this motionlessness, since even the hands of all clocks would be without motion. Even the very fires would hold their pose, each flame as if solidified.

In our search for sensations we have piled on more action and more and more until now the very absence of action would be a sensation so supreme as to be incomputable.

The first rudimentary principle of picture-writing, I observe, is to plug all holes through which could seep non-movement. Just at a time when the girl or

the boy could sit down for a rest, for a breather, another avalanche must come upon them and they must immediately begin digging their way out of it. And just when he or she is out of it again, another surprise in the form of motion must strike them, and it must be larger than any of the previous ones.

The same as our films must have action in them to the point of absurdity, so must so many of our books if they are to hold interest, so must our streets. If our streets already are not jammed with traffic we will hold fairs to bring the people here. For a certainty, no terror apparently is quite equal to the terror of non-activity.

Off-hand, we appear so fearful of this great experience overtaking us, so rabid are we in our commotion for more movement, that one would presume we were storing activity in advance in case next week we would be stricken by silent immobility. We want enough action stored ahead to last us through. Indeed, it is as if we were under the impression that only by racing our motors may we keep beyond the reaching arms of death, not realizing that these arms may as eas-

ily be in front of us waiting as behind us, and that obediently we may be racing right into them.

When I hear of men who, in search of experiences, fight jungles, bandits and ice-floes, and leap in parachutes and go under the sea in diving-bells, and still are in search of more action, I often think of suggesting to them: "Why not, for a change, try remaining perfectly still?"

I do not know what the answer would be. I can only guess. But I do know that of all the characters out for attention, from those who jump through loops bareback, those who jump over cliffs, those who swim the Channel, those who walk backwards across the United States—of all these the only character not yet exploited is that of somebody, sane and healthy, remaining absolutely motionless in public. Crowds would collect to see him. And eventually, of course, he would be arrested.

But such a frame-of-mind is not the frame-of-mind suitable for advancing this boy from his Northern scene of dynamiting icebergs to the finale scene which

may be (depending on the producer) a torrential dance of flames aboard the *Morro Castle.*

The public is paying for stupendousness, and stupendousness is something quite easy to measure. It is not something abstract. It is something astonishingly concrete. It is the fewest seconds remaining for doing the most.

Yet in our own hearts how well we know that stupendousness often is exactly the reverse. I am thinking of those rare moments when we are aware of not becoming older, when we are aware of having withdrawn temporarily from the contest of clawing for life. The clawing, the snarling, the lying, the biting—all these are going on without us, and we do not mind. Hours do not count because they are not gnawing into us, eating away our life's span, ageing us. We emerge from such sensations as young, absolutely, as when first we had entered them.

Often we see the ocean appear to be doing likewise. This is usually during a calm hour of daybreak, and when we view the sea from a hill so high that the surf-line dividing the sea from the sand is but one

white thread, and it too is motionless. Nor does the sea-sound arise from it. We move our arm to make sure it is not permanently fixed, also. We light a cigarette, and the smoke in coiling is the only action in the whole world. But the sensation, in all its concentrated greatness, cannot endure more than a moment. We are not physically adjusted for it to endure longer. It is too big for us.

But the spectacle of dirigibles crashing, of mountains toppling, of shipwrecks, of explosions, of typhoons—we can appreciate these. They are not too big for us. And so! On with the picture. On with the boy and the girl and the Coast Guard.

25

TODAY THE PRODUCER'S SEC-retary 'phones to ask how I am coming along.

"He wants to see you in the office immediately," she says. "Bring along what you have."

I gather my handwritten notes and also the sheets of my morning's typing. These typewritten sheets are not many, but they are the first I have done.

The negro bootblack at the stand across from the commissary is not humming this noon as I come along. Rather, he is arguing with the barber-shop negro on whether roulette wheels are crooked.

The secretary outside the producer's private office greets me with an attitude most businesslike. She is not smiling today. She is so much as telling me: "I'm an efficient secretary, and efficient secretaries do not let on that they know too much."

She has heard conversations about me, then, and I no longer need be favored. I no longer threaten to be in a position where ultimately I could be able to help her sometime.

"You may go right in," she says. She glances after me just for a second, then resumes addressing an envelope in the typewriter.

The producer remains seated behind his desk as I enter.

"Let me see something you've done," he asks.

I hand him the few typewritten sheets on which I had been experimenting with some of the sequences.

He reads them, and from his expression as he reads I can gather nothing. Finally he puts the papers to one side and addresses me:

"There is nothing great about these. Nothing great whatsoever. It starts out too slight. My God, who ever heard of a great picture starting out as slight as this. It ought to start out with a scene of big confusion."

He rises from the desk now, the better to demonstrate what he means. He uses his arms to indicate squadrons of planes in a medley of flight.

"There should be ships and S.O.S.-s. It should all be confusion. It could be night or it could be day. But my God, what've you done here? You've introduced the boy right away. And what's he doing? Running a nice little patrol boat. No, that's not the way to start a great picture."

He changes his tone, but he continues pacing the room. He could be dodging the visionary planes which are still filling the air around us between the floor and the ceiling.

He examines me sharply. "How long you been here?"

"A week, a day and this morning."

"Well—well—well—"

Obviously I have wronged him beyond recovery. I have done a great harm to him. I should tell him of the other opening I had in mind, the one in which a freighter is sinking at sea. The deck of the freighter has been laden with oil-casks, and now they are floating in the sea and the crew is clinging to them.

But he returns to his desk, there to recover with his hand on his forehead. Like a visitor leaving a sick-room I noiselessly steal away. In the outer office the secretary does not look up this time as I go by.

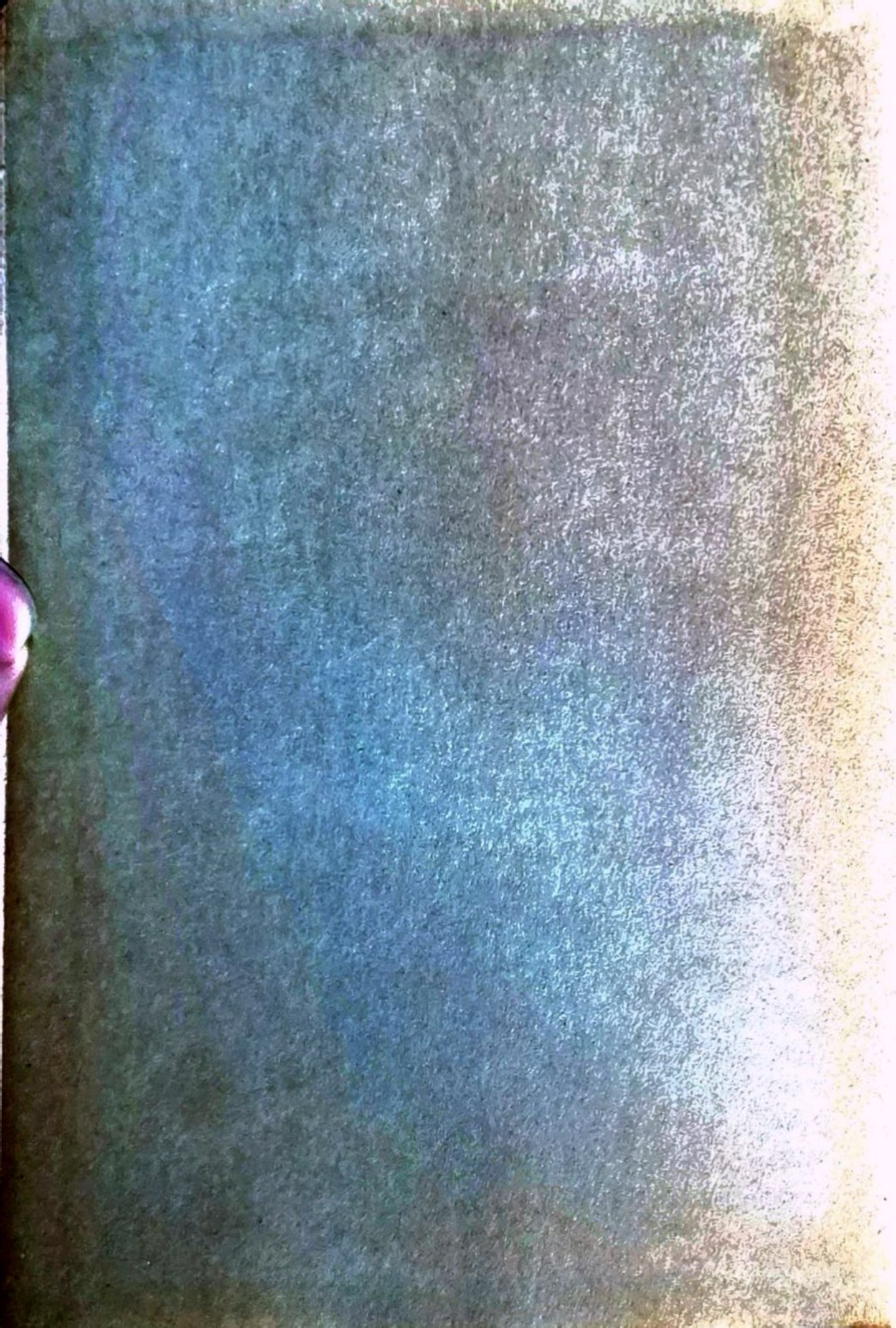
I hate failure, no matter where or under whom. So I return to my office. My few things are there. They include an extra pair of socks, two magazines and some letters which need answering. But I do not gather them up as yet. I still am thinking of the Coast Guard. It could be turned into a story. Perhaps if I forget the girl and the boy, and think only of some Coast Guard skippers I actually know in real life.

God, I have known enough of them. Or there was, for instance, that likeable fellow we called "Willie on the Pickle Boat," a junior lieutenant. But he already was married. I remember, though, the time we—

The remainder of the afternoon I write. The pressure of haste has been removed. It is all ended. I need now only write because I want to. I write until five-thirty-five when the 'phone rings. I had forgotten there was a 'phone. Now it rings.

The voice is not that of the producer or of the producer's secretary. The voice is that of another man, a friend in the studio who had vouched for my ability. He apologizes for the message he has to give me. He tells me he is sorry but that the deal must be called off. He had been told by the producer to tell me. I tell the friend to forget it, to think nothing of it as I had known already. My things I stuff into my overcoat pocket. My necktie has been off. I put it back on.

On leaving I notice that the name on the door has been changed. It must have been changed during the past three hours or so while I was inside working. The name is my own there now.

Outside the iron gates, outside on the avenue, the sun I notice is only a few feet from the pavement at the far end of the street. It is a most remarkably lop-sided sun. It resembles somewhat a paper-doll a very young child could have cut out of orange tissue paper in an effort to design a woman. The feet have been neglected. The woman has none. The child in the excitement of her first experiment with scissors had forgotten them.

The End